



自衛隊
彼の地にて、
斯く戦えり

5. 冥門編

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下

GATE - Thus the JSDF Fought There!

Vol.10: The Dark Gate (2nd half)

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[Novel Updates](#)

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漫画やアニメ、映画に出てくる
この手の生き物に、ろくな物が
あったためしがない。



「来た、来た来た来た！
やっぱりアレだ！」

は
這い出てきたのは、
虫と呼ぶには
大き過ぎる生き物。
人間の背丈ほどもある
蟲獣ちゆうじゆうだった。

Chapter 7

“That’s how it is. You will proceed to Ginza Garrison, which is being besieged by the demonstrators, and hand this to General Hazama of the Special Region Expeditionary Force.”

Kanou did not beat around the bush. He showed up at the appointed place and handed a letter that looked like it contained a document to Itami. They were currently at a certain riverside golf course at Saitama.

Since they were in the presence of a currently-serving minister, Tomita and Kuribayashi stood in line, at attention. Tuka and Itami were not part of that line.

Kanou’s secretary Noji turned on the vehicle’s headlights, illuminating the green, and then they heard the sound of a helicopter.

Workers in orange jumpsuits refuelled the helicopter with hoses connected to drums on a small truck.

Itami accepted the document and spoke the question he had been harboring in his heart.

“Where’s Lelei?”

“I cannot say anything given my position. Do as you feel is appropriate.”

This was a devious way of handling things. He had not issued any orders. In other words, Itami was free to do as he pleased. However, Itami did not quibble about it. That was because he had already decided to rescue Lelei, even if he had not said as much.

Kanou continued speaking.

“Let me introduce you to your pilot, Kawai of Kasa Airlines. He was once a Lieutenant in the JMSDF, and he’s the only one I could drag over here.”

The pilot held a map in one hand as he checked their route, and he extended the other to Itami in greeting as he heard the introduction.

“Pleased to meet you, Lieutenant Itami. I’ll be taking you 13’000 feet into the sky above Ginza. Just leave it all to me.”

Itami took the extended hand and shook it, but he could not help but exclaim as he heard the figure mentioned in those words.

“Eh!? What do you mean, 13’000 feet?”

“I will explain the details of the operation, Lieutenant Itami. Have a look at this.”

Noji stepped up.

Kanou’s secretary leaned in close, possibly excited by the atmosphere of a covert operation in the air. He shone a flashlight onto the piece of paper that was laid out on the car bonnet.

And here I was wondering what he’d show me,

Itami thought. When he looked, he saw that it was the blueprints of the Ginza Garrison’s dome.

“The Minister obtained this data through a helper in the Ministry of Defense. This is a national secret, so please don’t reveal it. Now, there is a hatch on the top of the dome, like a manhole. If you can descend through there, you should be able to get inside without being hampered by the rioters. And as it happens, the Gate is directly underneath. I’ve prepared ropes, so once you get in, you can use the rope to descend in front of the Gate.”

Noji laid a 40 meter-long bundle of red mountaineering rope, along with 8-shaped buckles and carabiners on the bonnet of the car engine.

After that, he laid two break-action shotguns on top of the rope, their round barrels rolling along the rope. Their stocks had been shortened in an illegal procedure, and they were now about the same size as a machine pistol. He put down a can of ammunition with them as well.

“Unfortunately we can’t do much about weapons. We had no choice, so we stole the Minister’s personal shotguns, complete with the entire gun safe, and we reported it as missing. So please don’t bring it back.”

Itami was stunned by how the Minister’s secretary could talk about committing crimes so calmly.

“We were quite worried about a lack of firepower, but fortunately Tomita and

Kuribayashi have weapons of their own.”

Tomita and Kuribayashi showed off the PDWs they were holding.

And then, Noji took out a large case.

“Here’s the longbow you wanted. Still, can you really handle its draw, Tuka-san?”

“Ara, you pull the bow with your back, not your arms.”

Tuka took up the bow, strung it, then nocked an arrow and drew the string to demonstrate how she would be shooting it.

“Acute-hno unjhy Oslash-dfi jopo-auml yuml-uya whqolgn!”

She incanted a spell to accelerate the arrow with a tailwind, and the arrow she launched from the tee struck the little pink flag standing up from the par-4 hole dead center.

“Ohhhhhh! You scored a hole in one from this distance! Amazing. I guess seeing really is believing.”

However, Itami indicated that he did not understand the previous conditions, and spoke up.

“Ah, hang on a bit. Were you talking about parachutes just now?”

“Ah, yes. This operation is only possible because you and Sergeant Tomita are airborne-qualified, Lieutenant Itami. Your skydiving skills are both of a professional standard too. Unfortunately, we could not secure any military parachutes, so we obtained two skydiving parachutes instead. Please make do. Also, time was tight, so we could only get brightly-colored ones.”

Saying so, Noji produced a pair of packed parachutes (in backpacks) from the car’s trunk. He handed one to Itami and one to Tomita.

“Tomita, you’re a skydiver?”

“Apparently he’s a qualified skydiving instructor.”

Tomita said, “Yup” and fastened the straps of the backpack around himself with swift, practiced movements.

“Wait, a 13’000 foot freefall? At night!? And a tandem jump!?”

Just as Itami was about to say it was impossible, Kanou cut in before he could say anything.

“Fortunately you’re a professional parachutist! After all, if we couldn’t even do this, then we’d be completely out of options!”

Hang on a bit — Itami worriedly drew close to Kanou.

Kanou was spouting disinformation; Itami did not possess such skills at all. Not only was Itami not a professional skydiver, he had been kicked out the door by the jumpmaster and the assistant jumpmaster. In other words, he was a coward.

He had tried to explain that many times. But it would seem Taro-kakka had completely forgotten that fact during this time of emergency.

However, Tuka put her arms into the harness while saying “Lucky me!” and he lost the chance to make that correction. It would seem she had been fascinated by this ever since Kasumigaura

“Youji! Help me put this on! Hurry up and put it on!”

As Itami fitted Tuka with the safety harness, he said:

“Ssurely we could enter through another access tunnel or through a manhole in the subway. For instance, there’s the famous hidden tunnels in the Tokyo underground; there’s a lot of ways to approach, no? Even if we don’t freefall in...”

“There’s nothing like that. Those underground tunnels are all on the Imperial Palace run between the Imperial Palace and Nagata-cho; they don’t extend to Ginza.”

“Ah, er... but...”

Noji had already discussed other routes of infiltration, and it was because they had no other choice that he said, “enough nonsense.”

“Are you listening? I’ve said this before, but the parachutes we have are brightly-colored and very eye-catching. So we’ve arranged things with the police. When you drop, we’ll cut the power to Ginza for a moment. That ought to plunge the streets into darkness so they can’t see anything. At the same

time, the riot police will fire their water cannons and launch a diversionary attack on the protestors. That ought to get the enemy's attention. At that time, you will drop onto the Gate, Lieutenant Itami. Got it?"

Alright, we're out of time. Hurry up and prepare,

Secretary Noji urged Itami. In the end Itami put on his parachute as well. Tomita carefully geared up Kuribayashi. The safety straps were just like from his paratrooper days, so they did not cause Itami any difficulties.

However, perhaps Tuka sensed the sluggishness in Itami's movements, and she turned to ask Itami a question.

"Don't tell me you don't want to go?"

And then, Itami replied:

"Sorry if this sounds like a betrayal of your expectations, but I was really reluctant to go in your case. I was really afraid back then."

"But in the end you still tried hard for me! I'm so happy!"

Tuka instead hugged Itami's neck. To her, it must have sounded like, "I conquered my fear of the Flame Dragon for you".

"Which is scarier, falling from a high place or the Flame Dragon?"

"They, they're about the same. Besides, I'm not a qualified skydiver. This is against the rules of the air. If the skydiving association people heard about it, they'd complain."

However, since they had no other choice, they had to go through with this.

"It'll be fine. I'm sure you can get over it, Youji."

"I think I can be brave when I hear you say that."

"It'll be fine. As long as the parashoot opens properly, I can control our landing location. The wind spirits were really friendly to me when I tried it the last time."

After putting on a skydiving suit and resting the nightvision goggles which took the place of goggles on her forehead Tuka braided her hair in order to keep it from getting in the way of her descent.

“I’m so excited to be walking in the night sky. And even if we fall straight down, I’ll be with Youji... mm, sounds great.”

Tuka seemed terribly happy as she freely confessed that she would be happy to die with him.

The helicopter took off and then accelerated forward, the tip of the aircraft suddenly lurching upwards as they pulled away from the gold course.

The shaking of their rapid ascent was like riding a roller coaster.

Instantly, the city scenery flowed past below them. The streetlamps, the lit windows, and the lights on the cars all seemed like shooting stars.

Tomita was adjusting Kuribayashi’s harness and checking to see if it had loosened. Since all her weight would be resting on that harness when the parachute opened, even a bit of slack would be frightening.

“Tomita, you take the lead. I’ve never done a tandem jump before, so I’ll leave the pre-jump check to you.”

“So I’m jumpmaster? Alright. Everyone, please listen to me. Kuribayashi, I’m going to connect our harnesses, so please sit on my knee.”

“Then Tuka, please sit on mine.”

“Eh! Are we going to continue what happened in the hospital?”

“As if, you dummy! We’re just joining our harnesses.”

“I know~.”

Itami poked Tuka’s head as she went “Ufufu~”

“Owie~”

“Once we’ve hooked up and finished inspection, we’ll wait for Kawai to shout ‘ten minutes’ and then we’ll sit down on the helicopter skids. El-tee, Tuka, please sit beside me. After that, once Kawai gives the signal to go, we’ll jump. El-tee, don’t forget the drogue parachute.”

Tomita indicated the small parachute below and to the right of Itami’s

parachute pack.

“How about jumping out on the third ‘jump’?”

Tomita nodded. “It’s about time,” he said, and Tomita extended his hands under Kuribayashi’s arms and let her sit on his knee before starting to connect their harnesses.

“El-tee, are you alright? You look kind of pale.”

Kuribayashi looked at him through her goggles. His fingertips were most definitely not trembling from the cold.

Itami hurriedly hid his face with his goggles.

“Don’t look down on me, I was a former member of SFGp, you know. I’m a skydiving veteran and whatnot.”

Seriously? Kuribayashi tossed a dubious gaze his way.

“It’s true. Actually, I’m a super S-class, but I just pretend to be an otaku because it’s annoying. If anything comes up, I’ll help you out, so just relax and jump.”

“The hell you say? What kind of chuuni bullshit is that!?”

“But it’s cool, huh?”

To think he could actually say that despite never having done it before. Since there were experienced people all around him, Itami had ended up learning from them in his daily life, and through his personal training and practice, he had picked up a surprising amount of skills from his environment.

However, Kuribayashi did not seem quite convinced. She muttered, “Is that so,” while nodding several times.

“Kuribou, when you freefall, make sure to hold Tomita’s hand tight, okay? And hold on tightly to the harness. Also, there’ll be a sudden air pressure change, which will hurt your ears. Do you know how to equalize the pressure?”

Kuribayashi replied, “ah, yes” in a way that made him very nervous. Did she really believe that Itami was an old hand at this? Itami pointed at the altimeter on Tomita’s wrist. It read 12, but the needle was already at its maximum. If

there was a number 13 on it, the needle would probably be pointing there.

“Tomita, I’ll open early and descend slowly. Don’t worry if you don’t see me.”

“Roger!”

“Lieutenant Itami! Ten minutes to jump!”

As the pilot’s words reached his ears, Itami gathered up the scraps of his courage, filled his body with it, and took a deep breath.

Liu coughed lightly, then brought the mic to his mouth and turned to face the massive Gate before him.

“We are an international NGO that seeks to liberate the Special Region from Japan’s monopoly! Gentlemen of the JSDF, please permit us to enter the Special Region!”

There was a Type 74 tank in the center of the Gate, which was surrounded by a human wall. The JSDF’s posture was to refuse everyone entry into the Special Region, and their answer was within Liu’s expectations.

“The Special Region is under the management of the Japanese government. We will not allow anyone to enter without governmental approval.”

“You are essentially saying the Special Region is Japanese territory. We cannot abide by that at all. The Outer Space Treaty that the Japanese government is a signatory to also applies to the Special Region, and it forbids any country from laying claim to it.”

(TL Note: Roughly: forbids any militarization of outer space and celestial bodies. Google it.)

“Please address those demands to the government. We have never considered the Special Region to be covered by the Outer Space Treaty. That is because the treaty addresses ownerless celestial bodies and the reaches of space. However, the Special Region and Arnus are sovereign territory of the Empire. They are not covered by the Outer Space Treaty. In addition, our

country has signed a treaty with the Empire acknowledging our rights to the area around it.”

“The international community does not acknowledge any such nation as ‘the Empire’. We feel the Special Region is an ungoverned celestial body. Such reasoning was once used by the former Prime Minister Hojo. Therefore, the Special Region falls under the Outer Space Treaty!”

“The situation was different during the Ginza Incident. Our country has signed treaties and agreements which acknowledge the existence of the Empire as a nation. Therefore, the Outer Space Treaty does not apply.”

“Only the Japanese government has acknowledged the nationhood of the Empire. The international community has not. You ought to look at the declaration that we of the various nations have drafted.”

“As I was saying, such demands ought to be addressed to the Japanese government. Whatever reasons you come up with, we are ultimately acting according to the orders from our government. We cannot let you pass when you do not have governmental permission.”

“If you persist in your stubbornness, we are left with little choice. In order to prevent the Japanese government from laying claim to the Special Region, we will destroy the Gate. Are you alright with that?”

The two big trucks behind Liu revved their engines, filling the interior of the dome with noise and black exhaust fumes. The JSDF personnel guarding the Gate raised their weapons, ready to fire at any moment. Killing intent filled the air, and the muzzle of the tank’s cannon swivelled to point at the trucks. The air between them was electric.

Liu put aside the microphone and grumbled to himself.

“This is crude work. I’m more suited for intellectual tasks.”

He had heard that the Japanese people lacked a sense of danger awareness, but it would seem the JSDF and its affiliates were a different matter. Liu understood that further negotiation was pointless, but currently, such pointless negotiation was essential to the success of the operation. They had to buy time.

“We’ll give you some time to think about it. Until then, carefully consider

what you ought to be doing.”

After addressing the JSDF personnel like he was doing them a favor, Liu stepped down from the front line of the protestors.

The men behind him stepped up to stare down the JSDF, as though to fill the gap he left. It was just like a pair of teenage delinquents sizing each other up for a fight.

Following Liu’s withdrawal from the front line, he found the military commander Major Wu Lianpao barking furiously at the people around him. Liu asked Major Wu what was the matter.

“Ahhh, why did they cut off cell phone communication too? Now we can’t even contact Diabo’s side.”

The phone in Wu’s hands said, “ The number you have dialled is currently unavailable due to power...” in a mechanical voice.

“This is what we’ve been reduced to.”

The soldier responsible for cutting the cables replied:

“You say that, but we had no idea which cables controlled the Special Region’s cellular network! Besides, we were just following our orders in cutting the Japanese government’s communications with the Special Region.”

Major Wu kicked at the tires of one of the trucks.

“Dammit! All you were supposed to do was cut the communications between the Japanese government and the Special Region, and now you’ve gone and cut our line of communications with Diabo too! What do you expect us to do now!?”

The soldiers looked silently at their commander, who was speaking harshly while in the grip of his emotions. Liu sensed that this might affect morale if it kept up, and so he tried to soothe Wu:

“Please calm down, Major. I was the one who ordered the sudden change in the operational Plan. The lack of coordination which resulted from that change is my fault.”

“No, it’s not your fault, Chief Liu. If anyone’s to blame, it’s Diabo for not

putting the Jade Wall into the box!”

The original plan was to take advantage of the confusion to seize control of the truck containing the crate and take possession of the Jade Wall which ought to have been in the crate. After that, they would surround the Ginza Garrison with the people from the other countries in the name of a protest, coordinate diplomatic pressure with the protesters and the media, and thus force the Gate’s management to be handed over to the United Nations.

However, when they opened the box, they only found the staff inside.

In a panic, they contacted Diabo, whose response was “If you want the Jade Wall, then make me Emperor. What happened to the troops you were supposed to transfer to me? If you don’t make the trade, you can forget about getting your precious Jade Wall.”

“Once the Japanese government closes the Gate, we won’t be able to send your Highness men even if we wanted to. Therefore, we need her. Trust the safety of the Jade Wall to us.”

“In that case, all you need is to bluff them, no? That’s why I sent you her staff. Make good use of it, make them think the Jade Wall is in your hands, and that’s all you’ll need.”

“How could we do that? The Japanese won’t fall for that.”

“In that case, there’s no point continuing this conversation.”

“Do... do you really have the Jade Wall with you, your Highness?”

“Of course. Bring 10’000 armed and armored men over and I’ll hand her to you.”

At this point, Liu had two options.

The first was to give up and go home in defeat. The other was to seize the Jade Wall from Diabo by entering the Special Region. Liu was forced to decide his fate in a very short time.

“Even if we enter the Special Region...”

Liu looked at the protestors before him, and his mind went blank.

They were nominally called protesters, but the people before his eyes were little more than an international NGO gathered from various countries. And then there were the exchange students they had mobilized, as well as workers and Communist party members who had come over in the name of tourism, in addition to the unit of special armed operators under his command.

It was that unit of special forces troopers which had given Komakado the mistaken impression that this was an army, but the truth was that they did not belong to the People's Liberation Army. They were the military arm of a secret agent organization that the Party intelligence apparatus had put together.

In order to conduct clandestine activities overseas, this unit was composed of Turks, Mongols, Koreans, whites, and various other races and ethnic groups so people would not be able to tell their true origins. Of course, there were Japanese people among them as well. In addition, each of them had non-Chinese passports... for instance, the Turks had Turkish passports, and there were passports from Pakistan, Russia, Mongolia, Japan, Taiwan, and the like. Neither did they speak Mandarin; they used rarer languages or English. Of course, each of these operators was a capable individual. If they were used well...

Liu made a decision.

He selected the females from this secret operations group and formed them into a team.

"After this, we're going to cause more chaos than we planned. Pretend to be tourists who were caught up in the confusion and seek help from the JSDF personnel in the garrison. After that, we'll force our way inside. Once we swarm the dome en masse, they'll surely take you to the Special Region for protection."

Among the dozen female operatives, the youngest, Ling Fanghua, tilted her head and asked:

"If that's what you order, then we'll do it. But will you be alright, Chief? Will they attack you if you're empty-handed?"

"The Japanese have always been hesitant about firing weapons. In particular, they heavily censure people who use force on unarmed people. Also, we have

people from many nations present, so they won't dare do anything for fear of being condemned by the international community if they massacre people."

"What should we do after we enter the Special Region?"

"Naturally, you are to seize the Jade Wall. You will bring the Jade Wall here by any means necessary. Once you reach the Special Region, locate and make contact with Prince Diabo. After that, demand that he hand over the Jade Wall."

"What if Diabo puts up resistance?"

"By any means necessary

. So long as you can obtain the Jade Wall, Diabo is expendable. This is your mission. Do you understand?"

After that. Liu and the others stirred up the international NGO and they had the students and workers taking part in the protests force their way into the Ginza Garrison. There, they encircled the Gate and stared down the fully-armed JSDF servicemen.

Major Wu returned his useless phone to his breast pocket, then turned to address Chief Liu.

"During my days in the academy, I learned that simplicity is the key to success. Counting on others or luck ought to be minimized, and the tasks assigned to each person should be as simple and easy to understand as possible. Having powerful backup is also essential. From that point of view, this operation makes no sense at all."

Their recovery of the Jade Wall, their objective, was at the whim of Diabo, and successful recovery of her was in the hands of the female operatives who were disguised as tourists. Even if their aim was to negotiate with the JSDF and the Japanese government, it would be very hard to make Japan give in just by taking the Ginza Garrison.

Perhaps Wu's words grated at him, because Liu replied in a self-deprecating way:

"Indeed, perhaps all you see is the battle that lies at the end of this road. But there's an ample chance of success. You don't have to worry."

“However, as you can see, the present circumstances do not favor us at all.”

“Certainly not. We will not be opposing the JSDF with our fighting power here. We can subdue the Japanese government by attacking them in every aspect of life. For instance, simply prohibiting the export of rare earths will severely impact the Japanese economy. The shock will be like their Prime Minister’s residence being bombed. In addition, we can arrest Japanese workers on charges that might warrant the death penalty. Also, we can give Japan a hard time by inflating the yen. For instance, if we bought large quantities of the yen, that would strike a deathblow to Japan’s export industry. According to what we’ve seen on the TV news, their city infrastructure is very vulnerable to hacking. The losses they will suffer are incalculable. We can request such non-military support at any time. Don’t worry.”

“Are those things really effective? It all seems vague to me.”

“I’m sure you would think that, as a military man who spends his time surrounded by weapons that directly damage human lives and property. However, this operation is being carried out by us, a non-military department. In my case, I can make full use of all the methods at my disposal, including your own military forces, to launch an attack on every aspect of Japanese society and thus ensure the success of this operation.”

“Chief Liu... the representative of the NGOs has a question. They’re having their doubts about the actions we’ve taken that have gone beyond the scope of what was expected. They have grave concerns about escalating the disturbance. And then there’s the matter of discussing the strategy to deal with the media...”

“We have the Japanese media in our grasp. Contact HQ and have them give our supporters a taste of the carrot. That ought to allow us to keep this quiet for another day or so. Then don’t forget to request a second round of support from our country to shake the Japanese government. Although, I’ll probably have to handle the coordination between the other NGOs... Major Wu, I’ll leave this place to you for now.”

Wu saluted tiredly and went “Roger.”

The twelve female operatives who had escaped the disturbance in Ginza and who were pretending to look for help had successfully infiltrated the Special Region, and they now walked behind the male and female JASDF personnel leading them.

“Please wait here until Ginza quiets down.”

They were taken to a small room on the fourth floor of a building.

There were six closely-packed double beds inside. In other words, they would be waiting here until the disturbance had calmed down.

It would seem their tourist disguise had worked, because nobody was on guard against them.

While there were two sentries posted at the door, the operatives felt that it was a very normal response.

They opened the windows to peek outside and learn about what was going on outside, and the guards asked, “What’s going on?” like the good guys they appeared to be. Ling played the role of a foreign tourist trying her best to express her thoughts, and deliberately stumbled over her words.

“Ah, toilet... we can’t go?”

“No, please do.”

They were given permission to go to the bathroom, and lunch was delivered at noon, so it did not feel like anyone was wary of them. However, it was as though there was an invisible boundary at the entrance to the hallway. Once they drew close, someone would gently but firmly tell them that they could not go any further.

“Over here, cannot? We came, all the way, Special Region, want to, go outside, walk walk.”

“My deepest apologies. You are simply sheltering here during a time of emergency and you have not been given permission to enter the Special Region. Therefore, you are only permitted to move within this building. We seek your understanding.”

Even a cute smile combined with an earnest plea could not convince the

sentry to let her past. Defeated, Ling returned to her room.

“How’s the outside?”

She addressed the question to one of her colleagues who was looking outside, and the answer was not very promising.

“Lots of activity. There’s vehicles running here and there. Looks like the men are pretty busy.”

“The JSDF is fighting a final battle with the Empire. They’re probably preparing for that.”

“No, this might also be because we took the Gate in Ginza by force and they’re preparing to eliminate us.

In truth, this racket was due to the Idate order that had been issued when the Ginza Garrison had been overtaken. The units holding the fort at Arnus were preparing to evacuate in accordance with the retreat preparation order.

In order to prepare for the upcoming White Rabbit order, they were burying fuel and ammunition in pits and then setting up explosive charges to blow them in place, in addition to choosing which weapons they would bring back and what stores they would leave behind.

“Dammit... I’m going to have to leave you...”

At the JSDF hangar, Kamikoda rubbed his face against his beloved Phantom, then poured the contents of a one liter bottle on the undercarriage wheel. It was hard to imagine that he would bid his beloved craft farewell so early and in this fashion, and Kurihama wept alongside him.

Perhaps the C1 cargo plane’s aircrew felt the same way. They swept up the cabin and then said their farewells in their own ways. Then, with a thunderous crash, the hangar door closed.

The crew chief bellowed at Kamikoda and Kurihama.

“Oi, Kurihama! We’re going, tear Kamikoda off his plane!”

“Crew chief, please give us a bit more time. To him, it’s like bidding his wife farewell.”

“Ahhhh, can’t be helped, then. Then we’re moving on first!”

“Got it, thank you, Chief.”

The JASDF personnel each took their bags and headed for Arnus Garrison from the JASDF district. The dome was packed full of trucks and other vehicles in preparation for a swift movement to the other side of the Gate once the White Rabbit order was given.

However, the female operatives did not know that, and to them, it appeared like preparations for a full offensive.

“We can’t do anything with armed soldiers running around everywhere.”

“We’ve got no choice. We’ll have to wait until the sky grows dark.”

The female operatives chatted and read books and otherwise pretended to pass the time as they waited for sunset.

While the JSDF servicemen would occasionally check on them by asking, “Do you need anything?” in an approachable tone, they were all women, so they did not do anything rude like entering without knocking or peeking on them. Therefore, the time passed for them without any stress.

Eventually, the sun set, and after they had their dinner it was nightfall. However, the number of people around them had not decreased, and the surroundings had not quietened down.

In addition, there was the sound of a disturbance from the outside, mixed with several screams and cries. They could even hear the sound of gunfire and explosions. These were clearly the signs of fighting.

“What’s the matter?”

Everyone poked their heads out the window to see what was happening outside. There was a huge blaze in the town at the foot of the hill. It would seem there was a fire.

“What should we do?”

Ling looked out the window, and she sensed that the JSDF personnel were focused on what was happening outside.

“We ought to sneak out amidst the confusion. The building’s position is the same as what our information said. We’ll leave through the window and head for Arnus on foot.”

A spectacled girl asked a question.

“The problem now is how to make contact with Diabo. We don’t know how he looks, and we can’t search for him. Also, isn’t that so-called prince in hiding?”

“Currently, we know that Diabo has a female interpreter who knows Japanese. Her name is apparently Panache. She’s a noblewoman in this world. I’m sure she must stand out wherever she goes.”

“Let’s ask someone about where she is.”

Infiltration and escape was their stock in trade. They did not need to discuss anything; they soon turned the bedsheets into a rope and made their preparations.

The ladies picked six of their number to go, while the other half would cook up an alibi for why the rest were gone. That was because someone would realize something was up if they all disappeared at once. Ling stuffed a balled-up towel under her blanket to make it look like she was asleep, then silently opened the window and slowly reached her hand outside.

Given that they had received specialized training, rolling bedsheets up into a rope and rappelling down was no big deal. The half dozen women in the shadow of the JSDF barracks quietly set out toward Arnus, the heart of the disturbance,

The Idate order had deeply affected the residents of Arnus too.

After all, there were less JSDF personnel around, but the few JSDF shoppers had passed the message on to the residents and then suddenly vanished as well.

“What’s wrong? Why the rush?”

The head chef saw a familiar JSDF serviceman running past and called out to him.

“The order’s been given to prepare for a retreat at any time.”

“Didn’t you tell them you were going to stay here?”

“If the Idate order’s been given, everyone has to retreat.”

The head chef cursed, “goddammit!” and kicked a chair.

“Why’s everyone going, weren’t they going to leave some people here!?”

“There seems to be a disturbance near the Gate, or at least that was the reason they gave.”

That incomplete explanation filled the ALC workers with an uneasy feeling of “the time has finally come.” That unease soon spread to the whole of Arnus.

The problem was that it was not just Arnus’ residents who were uneasy, but that this feeling had spread to the newly-arrived refugees as well.

As mentioned earlier, these new refugees were not from Coda Village. They were the orphans and victims of Zorzal’s scorched-earth campaign. They were orphaned children, old people who had lost their families, wounded people and many others, all of whom who had received Arnus’ protection.

The memories of slaughter and massacre were still vivid in their minds, and without the JSDF as protectors, they would once again be subjected to the nightmare that Zorzal had unleashed upon them.

“What should we do?”

“We need to ask them to take us with them...”

“There’s no way that would work. Surely there’s no way they’d bring us along too?”

“How can they be so irresponsible? Don’t they have a duty to take care of us to the very end?”

“Even our own lords didn’t do anything to help; why would the army of a foreign land care for us? They’re not obliged to do anything at all. We should be

grateful that they even gave us a temporary place to stay.”

“Well, isn’t that mature of you. But I don’t want to starve and I don’t want to die. And I’ve had my fill of being afraid. I’d rather live in decadence and be thought of as a pest than live in proud poverty!”

The refugees looked at each other and discussed matters in uneasy tones.

In the end, they came to the consensus that they would tell the JSDF, “please don’t leave us here, if you’re running away then take us with you.”

But in a corner of the meeting hall where everyone had come to discuss matters, there was a group which kept their eyes on the surroundings they talked about things which deviated somewhat from the main body’s conversation.

“Their security’s weaker now.”

“Everyone’s very uneasy. Now’s a good time to cause havoc.”

After they heard the words being exchanged behind them, the children felt a strange sense of foreboding and tilted their heads as they tried to figure out what they were talking about. However, the children could not fathom that the contents of that conversation were a threat to everyone’s safety, and they left them be to continue talking.

Tuwal the Harpy was in a corner of the hall where everyone else was discussing things.

She was not affected by the air of unease around her, and she sat in place with a calm look on her face. Then again, it was not so much calmness as a lack of concern. She simply did not feel the discomfort everyone else did. Every day had felt unreal ever since she had been brought here. She wondered if her feelings had withered away.

After washing her hands of her life in Akusho, she and the girls had decided to bid their dangerous lives in the Imperial Capital farewell, promising each other to make a fresh start, living a new life in the wilderness with their husbands. Life in a frontier village was by no means easy. She was not used to the strenuous lifestyle, which had left her and her husband exhausted at the end of every day. But beyond that, it was happy and fulfilling. That was because they had hope in

their hearts — the hope that tomorrow would be a better day.

But then these days had been snatched away from her all of a sudden. When she came to, she found herself in a JSDF medical facility in Arnus. Why was she there? What had happened? Understanding the sequence of events which had come to pass was not easy, and she was at a loss as to how to react to all the things which had suddenly happened to her. Even as she thought back about what had happened, the memories lacked a sense of reality and freshness. She could not tell the difference between what was true and what was just a dream. It got to the point where she thought that everything after leaving the Imperial Capital had been a delusion or a dream. She even thought that she had to get back to her daily work — standing at the corners of the Imperial Capital's Akusho and picking up customers by tugging at their sleeves.

Still, that might have been better. That way, she could have said, “what a silly dream” and paid it no further heed.

She looked up and saw the unfamiliar ceiling of the meeting hall stretching overhead. The walls were piled high with futons and pillows made of superior materials

She put on a pair of slippers made from a material that was called “rubber” or something, then walked slowly over to the basin to wash her face. As she looked at herself in the mirror, she thought of something:

How did she feel now? Was she sad?

Frankly speaking, she had thought, “I knew this would happen”. She had ended up like this because a being like her had tried to escape Akusho. Akusho was where she belonged.

However, a voice called her name and pulled her back to reality.

“Tuwal. I'll be going to negotiate with the people on top afterwards and bring them over. In the meantime, could you help me take care of these kids?”

Looking back, she saw a woman standing there. She had a group of orphans with her. Apparently her name was Touhatta. She seemed to have the blood of many races within her, so Tuwal could not place her species.

“Me, take care of children?”

“Yes. You seem quite free, could you do it?”

Some of the refugees were full of energy and vitality, and they took care of others.

No, perhaps they did so to avoid having to face their own misery. People became stronger as long as they had someone to protect. There were those who sought others to protect in order to strengthen themselves.

“You can? Then I’ll leave them to you.”

She had not even agreed yet, but before she knew it, Tuwal was stuck with caring for the kids.

She looked at the children with a puzzled expression on her face. The fact was that Tuwal was bad at dealing with kids. Once they cried, she had no idea what to do about them.

She tried recalling her childhood years, but she could not find any relevant experiences. That was because nobody had cared about her or helped her when she cried, so all she could do was stop crying.

Now, if they were men, stopping their tears and cheering them up would be easy.

She thought of these things as she looked at a crying boy. He had probably scraped his knee when he had fallen down. With her skills honed through years of hooking, she could play with men’s hearts as she willed. For instance...

“Eh, why am I thinking about stupid things like that?”

She shook her head, and brought herself back to reality.

“That’s just a li~ttle too early for all of you.”

Little bit nothing. It was much too early, far too early.

What kind of faces would people make if they heard this,

Tuwal muttered quietly to herself, and then she carefully put the crying boy on her knee.

For some reason, there was something odd with the way he was crying. It felt a little off.

“What’s the matter? What happened?”

As she looked on, several kids suddenly rolled around on the ground with pained looks on their faces as they moaned in agony.

“What’s happening, what’s going on!?”

One of the worried children peered at the children on the ground and asked, “Does your tummy hurt?”

Were they sick? Were they hurt? Had they eaten something bad?

Panicked as she was, Tuwal accidentally let the child on her knee fall off, but the child who fell off her knee burst his clothes and grew huge.

“Is-isn’t this a Dar!?”

The Dar were a kind of monster which mimicked humans or demihumans to infiltrate towns and cities, and they consumed the humans or demihumans who cared for them. However cute or innocent they might appear, it was nothing more than a monster’s mimicry. The fact was that they were not children.

Screams came from all around.

“It’s a monster!”

“We’re doomed! Nobody will save us!”

“Help!”

“Run! They’ll eat us up!”

The people blowing on the silent flutes shouted and fanned the fear in everyone’s hearts. The disaster in the building stole away their daily lives.

The monsterized Dar’s eyes turned bloodshot, and it bared sharp claws and fangs as it attacked everything around it. As Tuwal watched, the Dar lunged at the children in front of her with its teeth and nails.

“Run away!”

Tuwal shouted for the kids to run. That was all she could do.

However the Dar seized a child who could not run in time. It cracked open its skull with a

crunch

, then plucked off its limbs and shoved them into its maw.

“Aiieeee... aiiieeeee...”

Blood drenched her body, and Tuwal backed away.

The Dar turned its eyes on Tuwal. The voices of men turned were replaced by the wailing of women and children, and they spread throughout the refugee camp. Thus, the refugees became the first target of this monster terrorism.

At night, fire broke out in all the narrow, long temporary houses at once, and monsters stalked between them.

It was not just one or two of them. The Dars waited in the path of the fleeing people, and the panicked masses ran hither and yon in order to escape their sharp claws and terrifying roars.

“Is the enemy attacking the refugee camps? They’ve set fire to the place too!”

“No, the children turned into monsters! Everyone’s being attacked!”

“That’s exactly what Zorzal’s army would do, dammit!”

The JSDF personnel grabbed their weapons and rose to their feet. However, since they had received the Idaten order, they were forbidden from leaving Arnus Garrison.

“Why!?”

As their men approached them, the officers ordered the servicemen to contain themselves.

“Does that mean we’re supposed to watch the refugees die before our eyes?”

“You can’t take that risk. If you go out, you might not be able to come back!”

As he keenly felt the pressure radiating from his subordinates, Major Higaki wiped his forehead clean of the sweat that had beaded on it and repeated, “You can’t, it’s an order.”

“The guys from the other units can’t make it, but we—”

“What do you expect me to do with our numbers!?”

With the exception of 3rd Recon, the 1st to 6th Recon Teams under Reconnaissance Headquarters had been assigned to various combat groups to take part in anti-Zorzal operations. Currently, Higaki only had 3rd recon under his command, and Itami was no longer the leader while Furuta, Kurokawa, Kurata, Kuribayashi and Tomita were no longer around. The only people remaining were Sergeant Major Kuwabara and six others. That was all of them.

As Kuwabara insisted on moving out, Higaki wiped his sweat away with both hands like he was trying to wipe off his sour expression.

“No. I can’t permit it.”

“Still, we can’t just leave these civilians be, right?”

“Those are the rules. Once the Idaten order is given, we are to stand by in preparation to leave. Those are our orders.”

“There’s no need to obey orders like that!” Leading Private Tozu shouted.

However, the training officer standing beside Higaki rebuked him.

“You idiot! How do you think the organization’s supposed to function if people disobey orders!?”

“That’s true, but we’re still human. How can we call ourselves the JSDF that the people love if we just watch as people are in difficulty? Isn’t that who we are!?”

“What do you mean by spouting empty platitudes like that!?”

“That’s what the el-tee said before.”

Higaki shouted, “that’s enough” before slapping the table.

“I know very well what you’re trying to say. But I can’t say you can go. That’s because if the White Rabbit order is given, we’ll have to rush back to the Gate as soon as possible. At the very least you need to stay close by and not stray too far. Otherwise you might get stuck here and be unable to return.”

However, Kuwabara adjusted his helmet and said:

“Don’t worry, there’ll be a way. After all, Lelei-kun can open the way for us.”

“What does that mean?”

This time it was Higaki’s turn to ask the questions. Lelei’s ability to open the Gate was treated as a national secret, so Higaki did not know about it. The fact that his lower-ranking subordinate was briefing him about it was a strange turn of events.

Perhaps Higaki had accepted Kuwabara’s explanation, but he still shook his head and said, “No.”

“Even if she tries, there’s no guarantee that it’ll work, no? I can’t risk you on the basis of a possibility.”

Not even the men of 3rd Recon knew how many times Lelei had succeeded. That said, they had already begun gathering up the people who wanted to stay under the precondition that the Gate could be opened again, so one could say a lot of people were looking forward to it. Therefore, the men of 3rd Recon shouted:

“We’ll be fine. Just leave it to us!”

“Nishina, you’ve got a wife, don’t you?”

“If I stand by and watch women and children die like that, how could I go back to face my wife? She’s a forceful lady, she’ll say she hates me and then divorce me.”

“I don’t want to curl up and hide from this!”

“You guys...”

Higaki looked around at the others, like they were shining, brilliant beings.

“If you can’t approve no matter what, can you at least pretend you didn’t see it? We’ll take responsibility for it. Otherwise I won’t be able to proudly tell my grandkids that grandpa fought to protect everyone.”

Those words came from Master Sergeant Kuwabara. However, Higaki simply stared at his desk and replied in a trembling voice:

“I cannot. That is the one thing I cannot allow.”

“Major!”

“That’s because if anyone is going to take responsibility for this, it’s going to be me!”

The training officer beside him had a surprised look on his face as he asked:

“Major Higaki?”

“If anyone has to take responsibility for this, then it will be me. You are all my men, and everything you do must be carried out under my command.”

“Major?”

Higaki stood up and looked back at the training officer who was questioning him.

“Maybe that’s the way it is now. To me, it is that way right now!”

“?”

“Once the Idaten order is given, all personnel of the Special Region Expeditionary Force are to abandon their posts and combat in order to prepare for a retreat. They will wait until the White Rabbit order is given or the Idaten order is cancelled. But I am now giving orders on my own authority. After this, 3rd Recon will be under my command!”

“Sir!”

As Kuwabara replied, Nishina, Sasagawa, Tozu, Azuma and Katsumoto straightened up. Higaki surveyed his men, who stood tall and strong in a line, and nodded.

“I like the look on your faces. Let’s go save everyone!”

Under Higaki’s command, 3rd Recon practically jumped into their HMVs.

One of them — Leading Private Tozu — silently braced his rifle and cricked his neck.

He knew that there were children who could turn into gigantic monsters. However, he did not seem eager to take care of them, but frustrated.

“Dammit... to think there was more than one of them! Why didn’t I tell the people on top about this!?”

In order to dispel his regrets, Kuwabara said:

“So you’re that smart, huh? You can actually predict the future. Well, that’s a shocker. If you can’t do it, then don’t complain about not having done anything in the first place! You’re not the only one who knew that those monsters could look like children! But even so, nobody expected this. It can’t be helped.”

“But we could have given the kids an examination or checked them out somehow, boss!”

“How!? How would you tell them apart? Any checks we perform in the Special Region are obviously going to give abnormal results, and we don’t know what those results mean. It’s not like spotting those monsters is going to be as obvious as latex face masks!”

“But...”

Katsumoto, who was pointing the .50 caliber machine gun forward, expressed his agreement with Kuwabara.

“Tozu, it’d be better to focus on how to save the casualties rather than remain hung up on what’s already happened.”

“You lot, load weapons! And fix bayonets. Katsumoto, you may fire at will.”

Under Major Higaki’s directions, the men fixed bayonets on their Type 64 rifles. Katsumoto pulled back the vehicle-mounted machine gun’s bolt and chambered a round.

Kuwabara turned to Nishina.

“Hurry!”

Tozu nervously asked Higaki:

“Speaking of which, what about the kids? Should we save them even if they might turn into monsters?”

A situation where one could not tell friend from foe was nothing short of terrifying. If anyone could be an enemy, then they would have to be wary of

everyone. And in this situation, where a child could be an enemy, it was best to avoid them.

“Why are you stating the obvious!?”

However, Higaki said that the children had to be saved too.

“If you go over to them and they’re not a monster, then you save them, kid or not.”

“What happens if they hulk out in front of us?”

“According to the rules for using weapons, you wait until it gets bigger. Once it’s big enough that it doesn’t qualify as a kid any more, we’ll flag it as a monster. After that you can kill it without hesitation. Even if they censure us for shooting children, I’ll take the blame for it. So you mustn’t point your guns at the kids before I give the order.”

“R-roger.”

Azuma and Tozu nodded one after the other as Higaki ordered them not to point their weapons at the children before they were confirmed as monsters. Sergeant Nishina turned back from the driver’s seat and said:

“Do you know? Attacking a transforming hero during his henshin sequence is against the rules! Keep that in mind!”

“Got, got it.”

The HMMV kicked up dust as it roared into the Arnus Refugee District. The headlights immediately lit up a group of monsters wandering around and looking for prey.

Nishina saw a group of people being chased by monsters, and so he drove the vehicle between them.

The Dar failed to strike in time, and there was a tremendous sound of collision as its claws sank into the bonnet.

“Shoot it!”

Kuwabara and Tozu opened fire and bullets rained down on the monster.

This large, carnivorous monster was comparable to an elephant or a

rhinoceros, and it could take a few bullets. Blood sprayed into the air, and the beast staggered back, but did not fall.

“Shoot it! Shoot it! Keep shooting!”

However, this was not the first time these veterans had encountered such a foe.

Most crucially, Kuribayashi had defeated an opponent like this in melee combat. The Men In Green would not lose now that they were allowed to use their guns. They were all trained and experienced soldiers, and they could deal with any foe. That was what they believed.

The monsters began converging on them, as though drawn by the gunfire.

However, Tozu and Sasagawa continued shooting as Kuwabara reloaded, keeping a continuous stream of fire on the monster.

Even the monster could not bear their focused fire and it fell to its knees.

“Alright, next.”

They killed the monsters off one after the other.

Katsumoto was in charge of the heavy machine gun, and he killed a horde of the monsters as they approached from afar. They made sounds like a hammer pounding on an anvil as they fell.

“Oi oi oi, how many of them got in here!?”

The large-caliber rounds blasted chunks out of the monsters’ arms and bodies. But there were just too many monsters.

“Alright, let’s go!”

Mount up! This way! Hurry!”

As Higaki made his decision, Kuwabara grabbed the hand of the refugees being chased by the monster and bundled them into the HMV.

Are you alright? Are you conscious? What’s your name?”

To,,, Touhatta. This is Toista.”

Good, you’re alright, then. Let’s go, Nishina!”

Roger!”

After Major Higaki gave the order, Nishina floored the accelerator pedal.

The HMV’s bumper sent the oncoming monsters flying, and then it ran over them with its tires. The monsters trying to pursue them immediately backed off.

“Whew... we’re saved.”

Sasagawa said so with a sigh of relief, but Major Higaki warned him not to get careless.

“There’s still monsters around. We need to go back after putting these people down!”

“It’ll be fine. It’s easy enough to deal with those brainless monsters once we show up.”

The training officer’s face was blank as he chastised Sasagawa.

“That attitude of yours is dangerous. Don’t get care... guwaargh.”

“Major! Training!” Tozu cried

Major Higaki and the training officer had been stabbed in the chest by the refugees they had just saved.

After stabbing Higaki, the man blew on a flute that made no noise.

“The hell are you doing!”

As he shouted, Tozu used his rifle butt to beat down the woman who had stabbed the training officer with a knife, and then he turned around to smash the man who had stabbed Higaki.

“Die! Die, damn you, die!”

He hit them over and over again. It took a long time before Kuwabara managed to restrain Tozu from rampaging inside the vehicle.

“Tozu! Calm down. They’re already dead!”

“How should I know, boss? They might be monsters too!”

The woman Tozu had beaten down moaned on the ground, and then she took out a pouch from a hidden pocket and splashed the liquid inside the vehicle,

drenching Katsumoto and Tozu.

“This stinks! What the hell is this!?”

“These are the body fluids of insect beasts. Now the Dars will go into a frenzy and chase you. You’re all dead !”

After saying so, Touhatta laughed shrilly as she rolled over the bed of the HMTV and then jumped off the vehicle.

The woman hit the ground hard, and Azuma fired a hail of bullets at her.

“Wait, don’t shoot! Stop shooting!”

“Boss, what happened!?”

Nishina was currently driving, so he was focused on the road ahead and could not look back.

“The two of them have been stabbed! Nishina, get us to the hospital!”

“Roger!”

Nishina turned the steering wheel towards Arnus’ medical facility, but the way ahead was blocked by monsters. Their timing was perfect, as though they had been called there.

The monsters knocked down the temporary housing with their mighty arms and blocked their path.

Katsumoto showered them in bullets, but the HMTV drove over a stack of logs and square timbers that had been tossed in its way..

The vehicle bounced up and down. It went out of control and began to list rapidly. Ahead of them, Tuwal tottered slowly over on shuffling feet.

“Look out!”

Nishina turned the wheel hard as he shouted.

“Oh shi-!”

The out-of-control HMTV overturned and hit a corner of a longhouse used for temporary shelter before stopping.

“What the hell!”

“Is everyone alright?”

Because the vehicle had flipped, Nishina had to climb out of the driver’s seat, and after ensuring no civilians had been caught up in it, he said “this is a temporary housing building.” Then his men shouted from inside the vehicle:

“Sergeant Nishina! I can’t move!

“Katsumoto’s been thrown out of the vehicle!” Azuma replied in a panic.

Nishina jumped down from the HMMV and started helping up his immobile men.

However, he heard the sound of gunfire behind him and hurriedly looked back. He saw Katsumoto, who had been flung out of the HMMV, firing on the horde of advancing monsters. He was probably unable to flee because he was protecting Tuwal, who had collapsed.

“Dammit, why are the monsters gathering here!?”

“Sergeant Nishina, they must be drawn by the smell of the liquid that woman splashed on us!”

“Katsumoto! I’m coming, hang on!”

Nishina frantically reached for the rifle he had dropped in his vehicle.

However, Katsumoto’s rifle chose this moment to run dry,

As he stared down the monsters closing in on him, Katsumoto shouted, “Choke on this!” and there was a

ping
as he popped the safety pins on the grenades he was holding in both hands.

“I’ll leave the rest to you, Nishina!”

As he shouted that, Katsumoto rolled the grenades under the feet of the monsters, and then shielded Tuwal with his body.

“Braven Squad and Quatinco Squad, go firm up the defense in the streets!”

Sensing that the situation was critical, Yao put on her bondage armor, replaced her command baton with her sword, and then commanded the mercenaries hired for the merchants’ protection to assume defensive positions

The tribe where Yao was born had been attacked by the Flame Dragon, so she clearly understood the importance of grasping the situation and responding swiftly in times of emergency. Therefore, she was the first to act. Things being what they were now, there was no need for any special tactics. Things could be saved by giving clear and precise instructions.

Having lost their jobs which paid a stable income, the mercenaries threw on their gear and immediately formed a shield wall to strengthen their defense.

“Yao! Isn’t it bad to act on our own?”

Arnus’ defense was handled by the JSDF.

The man who said this, the man who was worried about future problems which might be caused by the mercenaries here organizing into units, was a man called Hunt, who surpassed the other mercenaries in age, military experience and popularity.

“We can’t depend on the Nihon soldiers now. They have orders of their own, and everything they’re doing revolves around those orders.”

“Really?”

Yao thought back about how she had once begged and pleaded with them, but they had not done anything.

One on one, the Japanese were not bad people. But once they grouped up, they immediately became stonewalls. That could not be helped.

“Arnus is our town, so we’ll defend it with our lives. Isn’t how it should be?”

“Understood, but how about her Holiness!?”

Hunt was talking about the most powerful commander of the ALC’s officers.

With Rory around, everyone could fight with their hearts at ease.

“Her Holiness is currently searching for Lelei.”

“Searching for Lelei? Did she go missing?”

“Nobody saw her after the afternoon. At first, we were wondering if she was hiding somewhere, but she still didn’t turn up after we finished eating. Leleidenka was targeted by assassins in the past, so her Holiness was very worried and went to search for her on her own.

“So you’re in charge of this place now?”

“I can hand over command anytime you want. This burden is too heavy for a slave like me.”

“No, if I take command, people will doubt me. Since this job needs you to manage all sorts of people, you’re better suited for it. After all, you’re the closest thing to one of the ALC’s officers there is, and although you’re a slave, your master is Itami-dono. Nobody will complain about that. So, what should we do?”

“Start by tightening up the defense, then gather and protect the noncombatants. Hunt, I’ll leave that part to you. Carry on.”

“Can do.”

Hunt pounded his fist on his chest, giving Yao an Imperial salute to show he understood.

“Also, I hope you’ll tell the people on the streets to go to the cantina. I think gathering everyone in one place will make it easier to protect them. What do you think?”

“By people on the streets does that include noble ladies?”

There were noble heiresses and their maids who had come to Arnus for language studies.

While most of them had moved on to join Pina in Italica, Panache had said she would be staying in order to keep an eye on Japan’s movements. Hunt was implying that ordering Panache to gather up with the other refugees was too much for himself as a mercenary.

However, Yao did not hesitate.

“I told you to gather everyone. If they don’t go, then say it’s an order from my Master Itami. She ought to move once she hears that name.”

“Did Itami-dono really say that?”

“Of course not. But I suppose Itami will forgive me for using his name to get things going at a time like this. If you show him results, he won’t complain.”

“Roger!”

And so, the children of Coda Village — led by Kato-sensei — the old men and the ALC’s workers all gathered to the cantina. Of course, Meia, the head chef and Giselle were there too.

“I apologize if it’s a little dirty, but please come this way.”

In the end, the mercenaries brought Panache and her maid to the cantina, while Diabo and Metmes also showed up there.

“Yao! Why’d you gather everyone here? This many people won’t fit into the store at once!”

They had moved the tables to the corners and left only the chairs, but the store was still packed full of people. The head chef and the waitresses were also complaining “how about thinking a little” to Yao.

“People without chairs can either sit or stand. The elderly, the children and people who have trouble standing can go to the VIP area and take the chairs from there. If there’s still not enough space, then stand nearby or along the road. Get everyone in town into the vicinity.

“What on earth’s going on!?”

Perhaps the news had not fully spread yet, so Yao explained the situation to everyone.

“Simply put, there seem to be monsters called Dars rampaging through the town. The new refugees have been attacked.”

“So it was the Dar! What are monsters like that doing here!?”

“Judging by the circumstances, it would seem they turned into children and

blended with the refugees. We're gathering up everyone to protect you from the Dars. But even if we gathered all the ALC's mercenaries, there wouldn't be enough of them to protect the entire town, so I wanted to consolidate our fighting strength ahead of time."

"Dammit, that bastard Zorzal!" Diabo cursed.

However, the head chef looked admiringly at him.

"Servant-san, it turned out just as you said."

"I know. But don't say that here, head chef. People will just get confused by this joke."

"Mm, got it. Sorry."

The head chef's apology was sincere. However, nobody could simply ignore that very meaningful exchange. Everyone's eyes went to the head chef and Diabo, and their silence demanded an answer from the two of them.

"Who are you? I haven't seen you around before."

"Er, um. I'm a follower of Diabo-denka. Ever since the Empire was taken over by Zorzal, his Highness came here to stay with Panache-dono. I apologize for stowing away here, but there were extenuating circumstances, so I seek your understanding."

"Eh... that means you're a prince of the Empire?"

Metmes elegantly nodded.

"Regretfully, I have been driven to hide in a place like this. "

In this way, everyone learned about Metmes-as-Diabo. However, that then made them wonder about the conversation that such a person had with the head chef.

The head chef could not bear the silent pressure from everyone, and blurted out:

"He came to warn you that Zorzal might do something like this to this town."

At a loss for what to do next, Diabo went along with it.

"Yes. His Highness knows the character of his wicked brother very well, so it

was not a stretch for him to predict that he would do such a thing. However, he did not expect him to actually result to such immoral methods.”

The two grenades exploded, and the monsters collapsed, seemingly caught within their blast. But that also implied that their thrower, Katsumoto would be engulfed as well. Even so, a quick death was better than being torn apart and eaten alive by a monster — or so he thought as he steeled himself for death.

Of course, he could not involve Tuwal in his suicidal scheme. Therefore, Katsumoto threw himself on top of her, like a shield.

But in the end, he did not defeat the monsters.

“Ahh, I hate this! I hate suicide attacks like these!!”

That was because a black whirlwind had decapitated the Dars before the grenade went off. Bereft of their heads, their massive bodies fell on top of the grenades, which absorbed most of the blast and shrapnel. And then, the massive halberd stuck into the ground further protected Katsumoto and Tuwal.

Rory pouted and hefted her halberd, bringing the root of a tree up with it. She pointed at a stunned Katsumoto and glared at him.

“Fight so you can live until the very end! As one of Youjy’s men, you’d better learn from your boss! Youjy would have struggled right to the last moment!”

For some reason, her words sounded very passionate. One could sense that she hated seeing people she knew throwing their lives early without much consideration.

Although there were warriors, heroes, bold generals and great commanders in this world... no, it was precisely because there were such people in this world that there ought to have been many men that Rory might have liked. Katsumoto had been bothered by that fact all this while. But after seeing Rory’s anger, he sensed that she did not seek a man who lived among battles.

A man who lived in battle would die in it. She had probably seen too many

people choose to die like Katsumoto had. However, Itami was different. That was because he did not live in battles, so he would not want to die at the end of the fighting. He would probably struggle until he drew his last breath. Even if the reason for that was his hobbies... so that was why she was attracted to him. That must have been it.

Katsumoto grinned wryly and searched for an excuse.

“Ah, er, I just thought that this was the only way...”

“You shut up! Of course, I respect your courage. But throwing your life away so casually will scar the person you saved!”

Saying so, Rory pointed at Tuwal, who Katsumoto was protecting with his body.

While self-sacrifice was a wonderful thing, dying with the enemy was still a defeat that came from being drunk on one's ego. Running towards death was nothing more than suicide — so pronounced Rory.

“Got it? However pathetic or embarrassing you might look, do not give up until the very end, but think of a way to live on. If there's a bomb on your right, then use your right hand to shove it into a Dar's mouth! That way, even if your right hand is chewed off, you'll still live, right? I hate high and mighty men like that! Got it!?”

Rory said that she wanted warriors to be resilient. That was because the desire to not give up on life until the end was what gave birth to miracles.

“If you die in battle, it'll count as suicide, and I won't collect your soul. All you can do is go to Hardy's side. So please.”

After Rory delivered her angry, dark-faced plea, all Katsumoto could do was nod, “O-okay” in shame.

“Sinn oenn huumrrra!?”

They were supposed to be hidden in the shadows of Arnus Town, but

someone had suddenly addressed them from behind. Ling Fanghua jumped in surprise, and straightened up.

This was a tremendous shame for trained operatives like themselves.

She viewed the people of the Special Region as an undiscovered tribe — in other words, an inferior race — and had looked down on them. It would have been one thing to be spotted by the JSDF, but Ling Fanghua had not expected to be caught by one of the locals.

She was bathed in a keen gaze that carried hints of a bestial presence within it, and she broke out in goosebumps. The armor they wore looked like it had been well-used in battle, which only added to the fear she felt.

At a closer look, more than half of the mercenaries were dog-like demihumans.

“No, they’re not dogs, more like wolves.”

While she knew that there were demihumans living in the Special Region from her dossiers, when she actually saw one, they were far removed from the impression she had formed of them in her mind. Perhaps she had thought, “they ought to be like costumed mascots in amusement parks.”

But after seeing one in the flesh, her body was numbed by a ferocious presence, as though there was a loaded and cocked handgun pointed at her. It was how prey felt when they were spotted by a hungry wolf.

They were very sensitive to scents, and they rooted out Ling’s comrades, who had scattered to hide, without fail.

“Koi moram mutta ! Mai fayuuure humettaa?”

The wolf-man asked Ling that question over and over again.

He was probably asking who they were or something like that.

Of course, Ling did not understand the Special Region’s language. However, given their actions, the mood in the air, and the situation they were in, she theorized that they were trying to verify their identities.

“...We’re, er, ah...”

Ling pretended to be uneasy as she and her friends looked at each other, and at the same time they answered in Japanese.

The mercenaries relaxed as they heard her, and sighed briefly. Their attitudes seemed to say, "Alright, I got it."

This made Ling unhappy. She had pretended to be weak in order to get the Wolfman to lower his guard, but it felt like she had been snubbed as utterly worthless.

Ling could not bear that sort of treatment. The Wolfman sheathed his sword and waved that she should follow him, and Ling just stared.

It would seem Ling Fanghua and the others had been taken to one of the restaurants in town.

Perhaps they had gathered all the residents in this town, but it was packed full of people from all kinds of races. There were so many people that the establishment could not hold them all, and they spilled out onto the surrounding streets and the plaza. There were armored warriors carrying shields, spears, swords and the like standing watch over everyone.

"Why are there local soldiers here?"

Ling tilted her head.

She could understand if the JSDF personnel had gathered the citizens here to protect them during the disturbance, but they were not JSDF men, so it looked like the town had been conquered by soldiers from outside.

"Ling, what should we do?"

"Let's observe the situation for a while. We can't respond if we don't know what to respond to. Also, since all the residents have been gathered into one place, it should be easy to find Diabo."

And so, Ling and the others sat in a corner of the cantina like the mercenaries had said.

Elsewhere, the mercenaries that had escorted Ling over called out to Yao to

report to her.

“Yao, listen to me.”

“What is it, Wolf? Look, I have a Master I respect very much, and while I’m very happy that you’re asking me out, I’ll have to refuse.”

“That’s not it! Don’t keep thinking of stuff like that when you look at me! Otherwise even he’ll start to think that I’m out to get girls, no?”

“I think we’re well beyond the ‘start to’ part.”

“It’s not like that this time. Anyway, I sniffed out some women who looked like they came from Japan, and so I brought them here.”

“Why would Japanese people be hiding in town?”

“I don’t know, maybe they’re afraid of the Dars? In any case, I put them in a corner of the shop. They don’t seem to understand the language. But given their movements and their bodies, they don’t seem like the reporters from before.”

Yao turned in the direction where Wolf was pointing and looked at Ling and the others.

Almost all the JSDF personnel had cooped themselves up on the hill in preparation to retreat or something, so why had they come down here? Frankly speaking, she found it hard to believe that they had encountered the Dars and hidden from them.

“Wolf. Did you see the Dars?”

“Nope. Didn’t smell them either.”

“Then why were they hiding?”

“Beats me. Don’t the people on the hill think in grand ways we can’t understand?”

Wolf erected a finger and pointed it at Arnus Hill.

“Though speaking of which, one of the women is staring really hard at you. Don’t tell me you did something to her? I trust you haven’t done anything fishy, right? If you did, then we’d have to hand you over to the MPs...”

“I didn’t do anything like that! If she’s pointing a burning gaze at me, then surely she’s fallen in love at first sight because of my natural charm, right?”

“What nonsense are you talking,” Yao laughed. But Wolf looked at Ling’s body and licked his lips.

“Damn, but that woman looks delicious. If only I could communicate with her, maybe we could end up together...”

“Even if you could communicate with her, no woman would go out with you.”

“My my, jealous, are we?”

“Say what you want. I’ll handle the rest, you guys just remain on watch.”

Yao shooed Wolf off with a “hurry and go.”

Just as Wolf was about to go back, he stopped and asked Meia, “Say, can you translate something for me?”

“What is it ~nya?”

“Please ask her if she wants to have fun with me.”

Meia was speechless for a moment before mumbling, “are you retarded ~nya?”

However, Meia felt that the best way of acquainting him with reality was to relay his message to her, and so Meia translated for him while adding, “This Wolfman wants you to do lewd things with him *nya*. *You should kick him or punch him nya*. Looking like you’re hurt works too ~nya.”

Ling blinked as Meia suddenly addressed her, but then she immediately smiled and replied, “Sure, when I’m free next time.” Her smile seemed very cheerful.

“Nya!?...That Wolfman isn’t kidding ~nya. If you tell him that, he’ll probably rape you and get you pregnant ~nya.”

“Wow, really?”

“He pretends to be a gentleman and stuff but he’ll go for it if you let him ~nya. It’ll be over for you ~nya.”

“It feels like you said too much.”

Even Wolf, who did not understand Japanese, could tell that Meia was not singing his praises. Yet Ling looked at Meia with sparkly eyes and replied:

“Frankly speaking, I like wolfish men. Maybe I’m reacting to him from a previous life or something.”

Meia broke into a sweat and grinned to herself, “W-well, imagine that,” and then she relayed Ling’s words to Wolf.

“Really!? She said that? Wonderful!”

Wolf raised his arms in joy and wagged his tail, and he looked like he was about to go up and push her down on the spot, in full view of everyone. However, Ling said, “I told you, we’ll talk about it later, now’s not the time for this, no? While I don’t know what’s causing this disturbance, you ought to have work to do. Go finish it,” and then she pushed him back.

“That, that’s right. We have to protect everyone from those Dar bastards. Then, I’ll see you later. I’m Wolf. What’s your name?”

“I’m Fanghua. But my friends call me Huahua.”

“Huahua, is that it!? Alright, then it’s a date!”

Wolf went, “Let’s move out, you lot!” and dragged his friends off with him.

Everyone stared dumbly at Ling.

This is the first time Wolf’s flirting actually worked,

everyone whispered. Even Meia, who had helped translate, could not help but stare incredulously at Ling.

“Speaking of which, what are the Dars?”

“Dars are monsters who change into children to infiltrate villages, and then they become big and nasty and attack people ~nya. They’ll eat you if you meet them *nya*. *It’d be better for a Japanese person like you to flee above nya.*”

“I can’t. Actually, I have business with someone called Diabo, so I’m looking for him. Do you know where he is?”

“You’re looking for Diabo-denka *nya*? Ask that person *nya*.”

Metmes was sitting on a chair from the VIP area, and Meia pointed him out as

Diabo.

Beside him was Diabo himself, posing as Metmes, discussing something that seemed very meaningful with the townsfolk.

“The person beside him is his servant Metmes *nya*. *And that woman is Panache-sama nya.*”

“A follower? What’s that man saying?”

“He says he wants to draw on everyone’s wisdom to negotiate with the Japanese so they don’t close the Gate *nya*. *He said, at this stage, maybe we all have to come together to ask them not to close the Gate nya.*”

“I see...”

Ling nodded, and then asked Meia, “If you don’t mind, could you help me translate?” and then she approached Metmes. Her companions followed as well.

Meia thought they were all Japanese, and so she was not wary of them.

Yao and the mercenaries were focused on the outside.

All the people in the cantina were thinking about how to negotiate with the Japanese.

Thus, a great trap was set. And so, for a short while, nobody noticed Meia and Metmes had gone missing.

Chapter 8

Metmes and Meia were dumped into the corner of an abandoned storehouse, stunned from their rough treatment and because they had no idea what they had done to deserve it.

“What, what are you trying to do?” Metmes asked. But Ling and the others did not understand him.

Metmes turned a pleading look at Meia. “Diabo-denka says he’s afraid but he wants to know what’s going on. He said it, I’m just translating, so please don’t get angry,” Meia translated for Ling.

“Tell him this. We have come to the Special Region to collect the Jade Wall from his Highness.”

“...Nya? Jade Wall?”

“Tell him exactly what I just said.”

However, Meia had a hurt look on her face

Meia talked to JSDF personnel everyday while working at the PX, so she was considered very skilled in Japanese among the ALC. However, she did not know what a “Jade Wall” was. Immediately after that, Ling picked up on it as well. She could speak the Beijing dialect, Cantonese, some regional dialects, Japanese, English and many other languages. Ling had gone through a lot of hardship to learn those languages, so she deeply understood how Meia felt.

“The Jade Wall is a girl called Lelei.”

“Nya!? Lelei-san?”

“Yes, now hurry up and tell him!”

Meia translated for Ling. Metmes, who had been afraid all this time, finally understood the situation, and he nodded heavily in relief.

“Mm, you must be from China, then? We were worried because communications were cut off halfway.”

“That was our fault, and we wish to apologize for that. However, you violated our agreement, so we were forced to take such drastic action.”

“That could not be helped either. After all, there’s no guarantee that you would actually follow through with your end of the bargain. We had to take care of ourselves too. However, since you’ve come here, I trust his Highness will also go ahead with the deal. Where is the army?”

“Unfortunately, we did not bring an army with us.”

“His Highness should have made it clear that he was trading Lelei-san for the right to command an army.”

“Give Lelei-san to us first.”

Meia was confused by this exchange. It was far beyond her ability to comprehend.

There was talk about an army, about handing over Lelei, and then there was how this man who ought to have been Diabo was talking like he was not Diabo. Filled with shock, Meia drifted away from her own job as a translator and asked her own questions.

“Hang on nya. We put Lelei-san in a box and sent her over to the other side because you said you were going to protect her nya! What’s going on ~nya!?”

Ling shook her head and replied:

“There was only a staff in the box. Alright, now tell him what I said.”

“How, how could this be ~nya!? What’s going on ~nya!?”

Meia looked to Metmes for answers, pleading with her eyes. Under the questioning gazes of both Ling and Meia, Metmes first answered Meia’s question.

“This has nothing to do with you. All this is part of his Highness’ grand schemes.”

“Of course it has something to do with me! I helped, didn’t I? I helped the prince-sama with his plan because I believed that would protect Lelei-san ~nya! But that’s not what they’re saying at all ~nya!”

Ling's anger built as they spoke between themselves in a language she did not understand. She grabbed Meia by the hair and jerked her head over to face her.

"That's enough out of you, you mouthy cat. I'm not here to talk to you. I'm here because I have business with the prince-sama over here. If you can't carry out your job as a translator, I'll break you and throw you away! After all, if you're broken, we just need to get a new one!"

But Meia bore against the pain and glared at Ling.

"Who are you calling prince-sama ~nya? Didn't you notice this man's been talking like it was none of his business since just now *nya? I faithfully translated what he said nya.*"

"What do you mean? In other words—"

"This man must be a double for Diabo-denka ~nya."

"Say what!?"

Ling furiously tossed Meia aside, and this time she grabbed Metmes by the lapels.

"You dare lie to me!?"

However, Metmes had not expected to be treated harshly, so he cast her hand aside with all his strength. Ling's companions looked around to see if anyone came, and they angrily said:

"Ling, what should we do? Shall we go back and get the other Diabo?"

"Our mission is to obtain the Jade Wall. We don't need Diabo for that. Anyone will do as long as they can give up the Jade Wall's location."

Ling approached Metmes again. She slapped him across the face, then spoke in a threatening tone to the frightened man. "Hey, asshole. Where's the Jade Wall? If you know, show us the way. Don't play dumb. That's because people who don't know the Jade Wall's location are all useless to us. We break useless things and throw them away. Do you understand? Break and throw!"

Alright, now tell him

— after being threatened by Ling. Meia nervously asked, "Where is she

~nya?"

Metmes understood that "break and throw" was related to "killing", and she was trapped between loyalty and fear.

"I, I know. But I can't tell you."

However, that only served to incense Ling and the others.

"Maybe a bit of pain will loosen your tongue."

Perhaps they felt that there was no need to restrain themselves because he was not the Prince himself, or perhaps it was because they were angry at having wasted their effort, but Metmes was beaten black and blue by the women.

Ling and the others had received unarmed combat training. They knew exactly which parts on the body would cause intense pain but not cause any lethal damage. Thus, the attendant of the Empire's second prince became the demonstrator for what they had learned in the field of tormenting the human frame

"Alright, answer me... where is the Jade Wall? I'll tell you this ahead of time; if you don't know, I'll ask his Highness directly."

Metmes turned to Meia, who was in charge of translation, and spoke slowly and carefully so the pain of his broken molars and the cuts on the insides of his cheeks would not affect his words.

"I don't think you can do that. There are too many eyes in the cantina; how will you capture his Highness? There's no way you can do it, is there?"

"There's no need to seize him. All we have to do is say that we've brought the army he wants, and the prince-sama will come over of his own accord. After all, he dearly desires that army."

"His Highness won't be fooled by these words. I trust you're not going to say that the six of you are the army in question?"

"Then I'll say we're part of the army. He won't mind talking to us if we tell him that the Japanese have heavily fortified the Gate and are deadlocked with the rest of us. Surely he'll accept an explanation like that, no? Then once we get him somewhere deserted, we'll be able to deal with him. I don't think Diabo can

hold out as long as you, can he?”

Upon hearing this, Metmes’ heart crumbled.

People would not be able to remain stubborn once they realised their effort was in vain. Perhaps Ling had sensed this, but she hmped in triumph and continued:

“Now give us the location of the Jade Wall and save us some trouble.”

Metmes answered her.

But Meia kept Metmes from replying. If Metmes was telling the truth, then Lelei might end up being taken away by them — that was what Meia said after giving Metmes Ling’s message.

“If you tell them where Lelei is, I’ll kill you *nya*. *If you don’t want that, then keep quiet nya.*”

“No, you can’t. All we can do is tell them the truth. Otherwise, it’ll be his Highness who will suffer next time round. He’s a prince of the Empire. He mustn’t be treated that way. And I’m certain it won’t be you doing the translating next time. These women don’t give a damn about our lives. Same goes for you, you know? So please, tell them the truth.”

We’ll both be killed here if we don’t tell them the truth,
Metmes warned her.

But Meia bit her lip hard, her tears flowing as she shook her head.

“I can’t let them have Lelei-san, even if I die *nya*. *I wouldn’t have ended up like this if you hadn’t tricked me nya.*”

“Why’s a mere demihuman like you talking so big? This is better than his Highness being tortured, no? Fine, now tell them what I said. Tell them I’ll guide them to what they want.”

But what Meia told them was, “This man doesn’t want to take you to Lelei-san ~nya.”

And so Ling slowly brutalized Metmes.

Metmes wailed in despair at this unexpected violence which had thoroughly

crushed his pride. He had a pathetic, dumbfounded look on his face. Then, he turned to Ling, who was holding his collar, and nodded vigorously.

He was trying to show that he was truly willing to accede to their request, and Ling and the others successfully understood his message.

His words and his attitude did not match up. Clearly, one of them was in error. Sensing this, Ling punched Meia.

“Bitch, you lied to us!”

Ling released Metmes’ collar, and without support, he sank to the ground.

He was crucial for leading them to the Jade Wall. Everyone’s eyes went to Metmes. Meia seized the chance and jumped high up.

After leaping up, Meia backflipped through the air and landed on the warehouse rafters above them, on all fours like a cat. Then she ran off, like a pantheress.

Ling and the others were stunned by this display of a feline demihuman’s agility.

As a feline demihuman, she was born with athletic ability that human beings could never attain no matter how hard they trained. Her speed was like that of a ferocious carnivore. No, in truth, the feline demihumans’ ancestors were savage feline predators.

Meia ran along the eaves before dropping to the ground.

Ling and the others tossed their knives at her back. Almost all of them missed or were evaded. Only one knife hit her back. However, it was not a fatal wound. Meia fearlessly vanished from Ling’s sight.

“Cheh!”

“Dammit, that fucking cat! Does she want to tell everyone about us? Ling, what should we do? Should we give chase?”

The trail of scattered bloodstains which Meia had left led to the cantina. They would not be able to catch up with her now even if they gave chase.

Ling went through the list of actions they ought to be taking and chose the

most appropriate one.

“No, there’s no time for that. Let’s go recover the Jade Wall.”

Just then, Diabo was delivering a speech to the townsfolk.

He used the verbal skills he had honed in the Senate to turn the people of Arnus Town into his supporters.

“Everyone, listen to me. I feel the Gate is an indispensable part of this town. That’s because we can’t hope to live like this once the Gate is gone. Recently, I too have taken residence in this town. It is truly a wonderful town. Everyone is full of life. Has anyone here ever lived in the Imperial Capital? It is a cruel place. The men bow and scrape as the whims of their superior dictate, and there is no pride in their hearts. The women are ugly beings that daub themselves in thick paints and tryst with men while speaking ill of their friends behind their backs. The slaves who work are always tired and weak. The security is terrible; the very beggars can be robbed on the streets. Even the Imperial Capital is in such a state; surely there is no need to look at the rest of the Empire. So why is it that you ladies and gentlemen can all bear smiling faces? Your faces glow. You enjoy life. And then I realized the reason for that. That is because you have hope for tomorrow, for the future. The foundation of that hope is the Gate. Therefore, we cannot abandon it, no matter the reason. That’s because abandoning the Gate will mean going back to your previous life of sadness and misery.”

The head chef shouted, “That’s right!” and everyone began paying closer attention to Diabo’s words.

“Surely people who are used to living well will not understand that. I will not lie to you — previously, I was one of those people. I was chased and harried in the Imperial Capital, and at great length I managed to secrete myself into this town to preserve my life. I first stumbled upon it as I thought about how to protect this town. Yes, they don’t understand how important it is. Those who are satisfied will say that this was only for a while. But they do not know how much you have suffered and how much despair you have endured for the sake of that ‘while’! I can no longer watch in silence. See how the monsters rage now

while the soldiers of Japan concern themselves solely with retreat. This must surely be Zorzal's doing. Do not be mistaken. The Japanese army has defended this place so passionately until now, so there must surely be an equally compelling reason for this sudden retreat. I am sure they do not intend to desert you. But this is too fast! It cannot stand!"

Diabo's speech seized the heart of the audience.

He sounded very rational, but in truth he was appealing to their emotions. He played on their pride and cleverly rationalized away their selfish desires.

"Therefore, I have been thinking. Now is the time for you to raise your voices. Now is the time for you to take action. You must shout, 'Please wait, don't close the Gate, no, don't go'. This is not an act of betrayal or resistance. This is simply a plea to let them know how you feel. This is not intended to harm anyone, but to prevent them from making a mistake. This is essential to make those who do not intend to listen to us look us straight in the eye! Surely the gods will forgive such an act. Of course, we must consider the state of the world. Indeed, the Gate must close someday. But it is not this day! Yes, let us prepare for winter before meeting the snows!"

Diabo told everyone that they ought to delay the closure of the Gate.

During the harvest season of autumn, people would eat their fill, store up food, then wait out winter for the spring. Diabo used the basic metaphor of laying up stores for winter to tell the people of Arnus that they were uneasy because they were not sufficiently prepared.

"We hope that they will wait a little so we can prepare ourselves. Tell them that, ask them what is wrong with that. What harm will it do? None at all. Yes. We are in the right here. Someone has to stop them from making a mistake. If a master is about to make an error, then even a slave will say, 'you'd better not do that'. That being the case, they will accept the word of freemen like yourselves. Is there anything wrong with what I am saying?"

The residents of Arnus were fascinated by the way this man had brilliantly expressed their thoughts about the present circumstances.

They all felt that he could speak for them and prevent the closure of the Gate.

“If everyone is willing to trust me, then I am willing to accept this burden. I will convey your will for you. So long as you support me from behind, I can negotiate with anyone, no matter who they are. How about it, will you place your trust in me?”

The workers asked Diabo:

“Can we really leave things to you?”

“Will they listen to our requests?”

“In the first place, will they even be willing to negotiate?”

Diabo wiped away everyone’s unease.

“Of course. That’s because I am backed by Diabo-denka. Diabo-denka is a prince of the Empire. That being the case, the Japanese government cannot possibly ignore that.”

Everyone said, “Yes” and nodded, looking like he had made up his mind. After that, thunderous applause filled the cantina, and Diabo had become the representative of the workers in Arnus Town. However:

“Hold on ~nya! That man’s lying ~nya!”

Meia limped into view, dripping blood, and her cries instantly quenched the fires of everyone’s ardor. The blood dripping from her body was like a bucket of cold water over the head, and several people rushed to her side.

“What, what happened to you, Meia!?”

Meia collapsed to her knees. The mercenaries pulled out the knife from her back and stopped her bleeding with practiced movements.

As they bound her wounds, Meia pointed at Diabo and shouted.

“Listen to me, everyone ~nya! That man’s a liar *nya! He’s got an incredible scheme up his sleeve nya!*”

“What nonsense are you talking?”

“Yes, We ought to trust Metmes.”

Diabo began to feel anxious, but he laughed off Meia’s statement in a tone that said, “why have you come here all of a sudden to spout such rubbish?”

“But he wants to hand Lelei to a country called China, in exchange for bringing another country’s army to this world *nya! It’s because he wants power nya!*”

“What’s China?”

“It’s a country on the other side of the Gate, separate from Japan *nya. The person calling himself Diabo-denka was beaten badly by women from that country nya. They wanted him to hand over Lelei-san and so they tortured him nya. He couldn’t take it and said he would tell them where Lelei-san was nya.*”

“What did you say!?”

Even Diabo could not feign ignorance of those words. He approached her and asked, “What happened, tell me in detail.”

But Meia smiled wickedly at him, and then she spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear.

“Why so worried *nya? If I was making it all up, then you don’t need to be worried nya. You could have just ignored it ~nya.*”

“But, Di-Diabo-denka’s been tortured, this... Panache, where’s his Highness?”

He looked around, but could not find Metmes anywhere. Unease bound Diabo as he realized he had fallen into a trap.

“Metmes-san, you’re a servant, yet you didn’t notice your master going missing, isn’t that strange ~nya? How could a servant be so inattentive to his master’s movements ~nya?”

Meia looked over to Panache’s maids, who shook their heads and said it was impossible.

“Yes, yes that’s true. And he’s acting awfully big for someone who’s supposed to be a servant.”

“Oi oi oi, why does it feel like things are turning weird all of a sudden?”

Everyone began to grow suspicious, not knowing what was going on.

It’s not like that. Just listen to me.”

Although Diabo was flailing around for an excuse to use, the fact that he had gained so much trust so soon was also the same reason why that trust had

vanished just as quickly. In this case, there was nothing he could say to keep the people from sinking into despair.

However, the head chef called out, “Wait a minute.”

“Everyone, hang on. Doesn’t that mean he’s been thinking sincerely about us? Also, the China women that Meia was talking about must have been Zorzal’s people. Meia, you’re the one who’s been fooled. You’re trying to fill us with doubt and damage Diabo-denka’s reputation.”

“Really ~nya? They spoke Japanese very well for being Zorzal’s people *nya*. *I’ve been in this town a long time nya*. The only place to learn Japanese on this side of the Gate is Arnus Town *nya*. *But I’ve never seen those women before nya*.”

“That, that may be true. But you can’t be sure, right?”

“Diabo-denka must have pretended to put Lelei-san into the box and then hidden her somewhere else *nya*.. *And that wasn’t to protect her, but for the sake of a deal. The people from China got angry that you broke the deal and came here instead nya*.. They say they’ve brought their army to the Gate in order to make the trade ~nya.”

“So the army’s here!?”

Diabo’s face lit up with delight as he asked Meia that question.

“Diabo-denka... if you don’t go now, they’ll take Lelei-san away ~nya. That means you won’t get your army *nya*, *is that okay nya?*”

Meia was taunting him. If he rushed out to keep Lelei from being taken away, that would prove he was lying. But he could not just watch this unfold silently. That was because Lelei was Diabo’s sole trump card.

“D-dammit!”

Diabo’s aim was to trade Lelei for an army and then take the throne.

Of course, he did not think the Chinese would go along with it so easily. Taking the throne would probably be very difficult.

Exchanging her for the throne was nothing more than a childish fantasy. But if he could make good use of Lelei, he might be able to ride the waves out and

preserve the status quo.

And so, he had decided his methods and strategy. He was also a gifted speaker. One could say that now was the time for Diabo to shine. However, if he lost Lelei now, then that possibility would be gone forever. That was more important than the support of Arnus' residents.

"What's with you ~nya?"

Meia studied Diabo's face with a wicked gleam in her eye.

Diabo clicked his tongue loudly, and then said "Let's go, Panache", before running out of the cantina like he was trying to flee everyone's eyes.

Everyone was shocked by what Diabo had done.

That was because it had neatly proven that Meia was telling the truth.

"But how!?"

"So he really took Lelei-san!?"

Lelei was an exceptional entity in the Empire, but her name was especially significant in Arnus. She was the founder of the ALC and also its leader. She was the mistress of all these people. She was also the one who would decide the path that the ALC took. While they may have opposed the matter of closing the Gate, Lelei was still something like the benefactor to these people. They would never allow her to be traded like some sort of gambling chip.

They had nearly been tricked by a man who would have done just that.

Everyone was shocked speechless. Their shock, their despair, their stunned silence... the sense of loss which filled them prevented them from doing anything.

"Metmes-san! Where are you going !?"

While everyone was unable to move, the only person who could give chase was the head chef.

"Does, does that mean you're Diabo-sama?"

The head chef caught up to him and drew close. Diabo testily replied:

“Yes. I’m Diabo.”

“So the person with you was—?”

“He was my servant Metmes. I wasn’t lying to you. After all, Zorzal’s targeting me, so I just used a body double.”

“I see... but, weren’t you going to send Lelei-san to a safe place?”

“I wasn’t lying about that either. I just thought that it would be safer to keep her at hand rather than send her to China. Don’t they say that in order to fool the enemy, you need to fool your allies first?”

“Doesn’t that mean you were lying to us after all!?”

“Enough of that! That’s not important! We need to keep her from being taken away.”

However, a squad of mercenaries led by Yao blocked Diabo’s path. Standing at the head of several mercenaries in mismatched armor, the Dark Elf woman pointed the tip of her saber at Diabo.

“A moment please. You’re under suspicion of kidnapping.”

“Insolence! How dare you demihumans bar my way! I am the second prince of Emperor Molt of the Empire, and a member of the Imperial Senate!”

If they were in the Imperial Capital, perhaps that shout might have cowed a horde. But this was Arnus. No matter how much Diabo raised his voice, neither Yao nor the mercenaries showed the slightest hint of fear.

Yao continued pointing her sword at Diabo and asked:

“Oh, I know that. But what does that title of yours mean?”

“Dammit, you lowlife”

“Wait, wait a minute.”

Panache put her arms around Diabo, who was reaching for his dagger, and

shouted.

“Your Highness, we should leave. And please, all of you, please stand down. Please, I’m begging you!”

Of course, Yao did not back off.

The mercenaries drew their swords as well, surrounding them on all sides. Faced with this silent pressure, Diabo doubled down on his stubbornness and made to draw his dagger, and so Panache ended up grappling with him in an attempt to stop him.

At Yao’s command the mercenaries finally reached out to seize Panache and Diabo.

Just then, a clear, resonant voice filled their ears, dispelling the tension in the air.

“Hold it right there! That prince-sama will lead us to Lelei even without the need for questioning. Won’t he?”

“Ro-Rory... Your Holiness...”

Now that Rory had showed up, Diabo hmped in resignation, and his hand moved away from his dagger.

“So you’re Diabo, huh? If you know where Lelei is, I’d like you to show us the way...”

The spike of the halberd thunked into the ground. Diabo reared back as the gigantic gleaming edge of the axe blade loomed in front of him.

“Your, your Holiness... there’s a lot of good reasons for this...”

“Yes, I know. You want power, right? BY all means, good luck.”

“Eh...? So, you, you’ll forgive me?”

“It’s not a matter of forgiving you or not... I simply like men who struggle. As the prince of a country, you ought to be aiming for the throne. That’s only to be expected.”

“Th-thank you very much.”

Diabo had been filled with guilt and regret over what he had done, but Rory's words had been like salvation to him, and he smiled. However, what Rory said next was chastisement, and Diabo hung his head once more.

"Still, as one aiming for the throne, you need to have class in whatever you do. Performing despicable acts only degrades yourself."

"Yes, yes, of course. I will engrave that into my heart."

"Now then, did you treat Lelei well?"

"Of, of course, while one could say that my treatment of that common (Rurudo) girl... no no, I mean, while we did not make that scholar renowned as a sage and also the heroine who slew the Flame Dragon as comfortable as we could have, We saw to it that she received treatment fitting her station. Although she was bound, I did not touch her. Instead it was Panache who gently and carefully locked her up, but we still, we still... we still put her in an appropriate place..."

"Then, where is she?"

"Er... ah, er... in a storeroom."

"A storeroom... so that's your definition of treatment fitting her station and an appropriate place?"

Rory scratched her cheek.

Ah, er..."

Not even Diabo could answer. However, they had to go and save her right away. Led by Diabo, everyone came to the storeroom where Lelei was being held.

"It's here."

There was a bed inside, of the kind used for kings and nobility, which proved that Diabo had treated Lelei as she deserved. But when they looked inside, all they saw was a bound and gagged Metmes whimpering and rolling around.

General Hazama queried his men for information as they hurried back to his office.

“What’s going on in Arnus Town!?”

“There are many dead and wounded among the new refugees. We’ve got our hands full just saving people, and we can’t spare the men to deal with the monsters. The ALC’s mercenaries have mobilized to protect the townsfolk, but they can’t help on the new refugees’ side.”

“It can’t be helped. Cancel 5th Battle Group’s standby orders and have them help receive the wounded and dead. Open the medical facility and treat the injured as soon as possible. Gather the townsfolk into the garrison. Let everyone take shelter here. And then... when will the other combat groups report back?”

“The leading elements of the nearest combat group are still about three to four hours away. Bringing everyone back will probably take a day or so...”

His staff officers indicated that it would probably be impossible to recover all their men scattered throughout the Special Region within a day.

“In any case, continue negotiating with the protestors to buy time. Have communications with Ichigaya been restored yet?”

“No, all lines have been cut.”

“Wireless?”

“The building was designed to block radio waves, unfortunately.”

Hazama looked at the monitor which displayed the situation within the dome.

The self-proclaimed international NGO had brought large trucks inside the dome, with heavy steel rebar welded over its front bumper. Its front end was pointed like a siege ram, probably to increase its destructive power when striking the Gate. One could gauge their commitment to the cause when they said they wanted to wreck the Gate.

Hazama did not think that an international NGO which did this were ordinary civilians.

The man who called himself their leader, Liu, might have been a civilian or a bureaucrat, but he was surrounded by straight-backed men who held themselves like military personnel. In addition, his style of negotiation was not the forceful one-sided demands that freedom protestors frequently made, but a declaration of war cunningly made in the format of a negotiation.

They were probably agents from another country or something similar.

“If anything happens, do not hesitate to use force to eliminate them in order to recover our men. Prepare to execute the steps for White Rabbit. Also, make sure to leave behind medicine and rations.”

“Yes.”

If they started wrecking the Gate now, it would be very hard for everyone to return.

Many of the Special Region Expeditionary Force’s personnel would be stranded in the Special Region. In that case, all they could do was survive on their remaining supplies until the next time they opened the Gate.

“How about revoking the retreat preparation order and exterminating Zorzal first? That way, our treaty with the Empire will take effect. Then we can defend Arnus with our remaining units.”

“No, that’s the wrong way around Right now, we need to follow the manual.”

The emergency response manual had been drafted by the Cabinet, and they were effectively orders from the Prime Minister. Hazama was merely the commander of the expeditionary force, and violating those instructions was not a good thing. Granted, it was impossible to fully carry them out, and they had to consider the men who were staying behind, but prioritizing military matters ahead of them was putting the cart before the horse.

“It’s about time.”

Hazama left the office once again and entered the dome, and then he walked in front of the Type 74 tank that stood at the heart of the Gate. The man who claimed to be the representative of the international NGO was waiting there. He stood in front of Hazama and began the negotiation that was more of a form of intimidation.

“Will you accept our demands now?”

The engines of the two big trucks revved in time with the words of the man from the NGO, like motorcycle gangsters gunning their engines to taunt their rivals into a game of chicken. However, Hazama said, “No,” without even thinking about it.

“Do what you please. We’re just here to stop any schemes you have in mind. But when the time comes, we might end up using firearms, so prepare yourselves.”

Hazama gave an order, and the Type 74 tank swivelled its turret to point at the trucks.

The ranks of JSDF troopers disengaged the safeties on their Type 64 rifles and levelled their bayonets at the members of the self-proclaimed NGO. However, their representative did not seem afraid.

He said, “You’d better not push it,” then laughed before continuing.

“Surely you can’t open fire on unarmed civilians like ourselves. Everyone knows you’re the good guys. And that is not meant to be praise. If you can’t harden your hearts and do cruel things when the situation calls for it, you won’t be able to protect your nation’s dignity or safety. A country must be feared rather than loved. But your country is not like that.”

“What are you trying to say? Are you looking down on us?”

“Precisely. Of course, I don’t think it’s your fault.”

Hazama could not respond. That was because it was the government which ought to decide how a country should live, not its uniformed personnel.

“Then I’ll repeat our demands. Please allow us to enter the Special Region. While the Japanese government may hand over the Gate and the administration of the Special Region to the United Nations, we may have to destroy the Gate depending on how the negotiations go. That would strand you in another world. If you hand the Gate over to us before that, you will not become drifters. I feel these are excellent terms. What do you think?”

“Not only are these terms not acceptable, they are very displeasing. Do you

think we'll give in to such threats? We will never allow you to enter the Special Region."

"Then you won't be able to come back to Japan. If that happens, it'll be the fault of yourselves and the Japanese government, and not us."

"We are prepared for that. We have never been in a position to accept your demands to begin with. If you want to negotiate, go speak with the government."

"That is not true. As Sun Tzu said; 'when the general is capable and the ruler does not impede him, he will be victorious'. You are a general of Japan, so you ought to have the authority to use your discretion. Hurry up and let us into the Special Region. Then we will not need to destroy the Gate."

Something struck Hazama as off as he heard Liu's words.

Even if they planned to enter the Special Region with arms in place of the JSDF, they would not be able to maintain the situation there for long. What was the aim of this negotiation? Doubts formed in his heart.

Hazama asked a question for confirmation.

"The government's plan is to temporarily close the Gate. Even if you take our place, we will close it without hesitation. In that case, you will be the ones adrift in a strange world."

"Of course, we will not let the Gate close. That's because the General Assembly of the UN will make that decision."

"I see. Which means you will send Green Berets from your country, no? But the Japanese government will certainly refuse. And it has already been made public that the Gate's existence has caused unnatural phenomena in various countries around the world... do you think the disasters from those phenomena are not related to the Gate?"

"Many countries question those reports. We peaceful protesters are gathered here from the peoples of the major nations of the world for precisely that reason."

"Peaceful protesters, don't make me laugh. And you say that you're from the

major nations, but aren't you all the only ones here? Where are the Caucasians?"

"I am in charge of negotiations here. The Caucasians are negotiating with the police outside the dome.

"And what national agency do you work for?

"We are an NGO. We are not acting for any particular nation's benefit."

"And you expect me to believe that?"

Their way of speaking and their organization all told him that they were a clandestine group working for the Chinese Communist Party.

There were various groups both inside and outside the country which took orders from the government and which the government managed. That was why there were Chinese groups which loudly proclaimed that "the Diaoyu Islands are Chinese territory!" in Europe and North America, and there were overseas Chinese who appeared to be obedient citizens right until something happened and they turned into spies and agents.

In recent years, there were reports that JSDF personnel were starting to marry abroad, and there were examples of spouses of workers in the defense industries actually being agents. They had originally come to Japan as agents, they lived very normally in Japan, but when they were suddenly placed in an environment where they could gather intelligence, they were ordered to begin spying and send data over, using their families within China as hostages.

Hazama felt that this man was pretending to represent the opinions of various countries, but his words only expressed the will of one nation.

"I see, so that's how it is. I understand. Then I'll repeat the final answer to your demands. We will fulfil the orders that the government gives us under any circumstances."

"How brave. But the Japanese government won't be as calm as you. Do you think they can bear losing you?"

"Thanks to you, our communications with the Japanese government have been severed. Thus we can only carry out the orders we were given before

that.”

“Are you going to stubbornly enforce those orders?”

“Of course. That’s what they call civilian control of the military.”

Liu walked up to Hazama and said:

“Which means you’re all choosing to become drifters?”

“We are already prepared for that.”

Hazama shook him off, and the representative said:

“I thought you were going to say that you were going to return to Japan by force...”

“That is an option we are prepared for.”

“We’ll be very glad for that. That’s because you will surely reenact Tiananmen Square in 1964. The international community will surely criticize Japan for it. Using bayonets and tanks to crush peaceful protestors... well, it’ll make for good footage. Although our country has been censured for its human rights violations, we will be able to do the same to Japan now.”

The representative gestured to the man holding a handycam beside him.

“Our only way back to Japan is blocked by you, so our only option is to pass you by force. All we have to do is say so after the fact. It will be accepted as an emergency measure.”

“If

it is accepted. How do you think the Japanese media will report your actions? They’ll spin this as a massacre of protestors using unlawful force and criticize you for destroying the Gate.”

Upon hearing this, Hazama went, “Say what!?” and his face went pale.

“Your men have families too. They’ll be scorned by their neighbors, no?”

Hazama bit his lip.

That was because Hazama could not say that the Japanese media would not do such a thing.

The media insisted that the news existed in order to keep an eye on those in power and the movements of society, and to serve as whistleblowers. Of course, fulfilling their role as bystanders and reporting everything about and around themselves was beneficial to society. But recently, the media had begun deciding what was good and bad and then forcing their opinions onto the masses. Their reports began to blatantly overstep the bounds of mere criticism, and their content was becoming increasingly politicized and designed to manipulate the will of the citizens for their own convenience.

Their biased interviews with election candidates which ran counter to their opinions was a clear sign of this.

This was further supported by the way they attacked people not for how they would handle the Prime Minister's power, but on mispronouncing kanji, how they spent their free time, and their personal character.

In other words, the media was not actually reporting news, but propagandizing to create an environment favorable to themselves. In addition, what was hard to believe was how their actions aligned with overseas factions who were opposed to Japan.

Liu was in charge of the battle to seize the Japanese media, and his voice dripped with pride at his accomplishments as he continued speaking to Hazama.

"I'll say this first. We aren't the ones who will hurt the families of your men. You are. Your actions will decide everything.

One could say that anyone with the ability to control the massmedia could make any sorts of reports they wanted, and thus they had the ability to dictate the situation. Hazama knew that Japan could not oppose this, which vexed him. But at the same time, he fired back in the hopes of finding some line of counterattack.

"The truth will come out eventually. And the international community will also..."

"Righteousness and truth are all nonsense. Money can settle it all. For instance, when people who opposed the Chinese establishment received Nobel Peace Prizes, how many countries absented themselves from the ceremony?

That just proves that nobody respects that so-called justice. There are few countries in the world to whom the term 'just' can be applied. It might be better to treat Japan as the exception to the rule.

After that, Hazama took a deep breath, and adjusted himself.

"I see... now I understand."

"Ohh, you do?"

"Oh yes, I do. You're pretending to negotiate, but you're actually stalling for time."

"...What?"

"We cannot possibly fulfil your demands. In other words, you want us to do nothing."

"Indeed. However, it seems you've realized that a little too late."

Liu sneered at Hazama, and then gestured behind the other man with his chin.

The women standing there had a bound Lelei as a hostage.

"Aren't they the tourists we were protecting?"

"Oh yes. While it pains me to take advantage of your good nature, you should regard this as a lesson in how people who treat everyone kindly are nothing but fools."

As Hazama's men saw Lelei was a hostage, all they could do was watch from afar.

Yao's mercenaries and Arnus' townsfolk had caught up as well, but just like the JSDF personnel, they could only watch when they saw how they had a knife to Lelei's throat.

"Let go of Lelei-san!"

As he glanced at the Arnus townsfolk who were bellowing and shouting from the corner of his eye, Liu made a proposal.

"Alright. Step aside and let them pass. In that case, we will not harm the hostage. I promise you that."

“You must not let them pass no matter what! She’s their objective! They won’t harm her!”

Hazama ordered his men not to let them through and then looked back at Liu.

“I see... so all this was for her, is that it?”

“We do not just take one action to accomplish one goal. Strictly speaking, this was also one of our aims.”

Liu was all smiles.

“Ten minutes until Ginza airspace. Please get ready!”

After hearing the pilot’s command, Itami prepared himself.

He checked his safety harness over and over again for problems. SUCH excessive concern showed his unease and the fear he was hiding.

Itami and Tomita each hugged Tuka and Kuribayashi, then they opened the helicopter doors and stood on the skids.

For some reason, the city at night looked like the stars over their heads, and for a moment he even felt that he was floating in space.

“I, I’m scaaaaaaaared! And coooooooooold!”

The chill wind from outside made Itami shiver.

Kuribayashi looked annoyedly at him as he squealed. Itami’s voice was flaring up her own fear and unease.

“El, el-tee, aren’t you supposed to be a veteran jumper!?”

Kuribayashi rebuked Itami for not being what he promised.

She went on to say, “If you’re so experienced, then you ought to act like it and not scare the newbies!”

“Dumb~ass, do you think someone without fear would make a good paratrooper? You’re more careful because you’re afraid, aren’t you?”

Then, Tuka suddenly giggled from her place on Itami's knee. She could tell he was trembling and putting on a brave front because they were so close together.

"W-what!?"

"Nothing, you're just reassuring, is all."

That seemed to trigger Kuribayashi's memories, because she shouted:

"That, that's it! I forgot something important! El-tee, Tomita's raised a death flag!"

"Say what!?"

"He said he was going to marry Bozes after the war was over."

"What the hell, why didn't you tell me earlier!?" Itami shouted. "This is bad, this is really bad! We're going to be doing some risky business after this, what should we do now!?"

"Exactly! Why do I have to do it with a guy who has a death flag hanging over him!?"

Kuribayashi shivered and said, "Now I'm part of this too."

Just then, Kawai the pilot turned back and shouted, "Please jump!"

"El-tee! We jump on three!"

After hearing Tomita's voice, Itami replied, "Wait!"

Kuribayashi shouted too. "Noooo! I don't want this! I don't want to go skydiving or whatnot after raising that flag!"

But Tuka said, "Don't worry, Shino! I'll get rid of that flag for you," and then she winked at Tomita as he looked at her.

"One, exit!"

"Eh!?"

"I'll marry Youji after this war is over!"

As she shouted that, Tuka jumped out into the sky, pulling Itami with her, and by the time he realised it, he was in mid-air.

“Hey, Tuka! What did you just say!? Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Itami assumed a diving position as he screamed, and he threw out the drogue to slow his descent.

Shortly after, Tomita jumped out in pursuit of the two of them.

Tomita put his arm under Kuribayashi’s neck, lightly raising her chin, and they turned in mid-air several times as they flew through Tokyo’s night sky.

The wind rushed up at them at speeds of over 200 km/h, and the air flowed past their outstretched arms and between their fingers.

Itami reached toward his waist in order to immediately deploy his parachute. He pulled hard, and felt the parachute open up behind his back, and a mighty impact rocked his body.

However, Itami immediately felt something was wrong. The wind was rushing too quickly over his skin. Perhaps he had decelerated, but this was not the speed he ought to be experiencing if his parachute had fully opened.

“We’re not slowing down!?”

A problem with night jumping was that it was very difficult to tell if one’s parachute had opened. While one could check with nightvision equipment, Itami did not have the presence of mind for that, and instead he reflexively chose to jettison it.

After shedding his main parachute, he began freefalling again.

Itami hugged Tuka from behind as he tumbled backward through the air.

“Guwaaaaaaargh! Why is a one-in-a-thousand chance like this cropping up nownow!? Is it because of the death flag!? Is this what a death flag is!?”

Itami shouted, but the ferocious wind kept him from hearing his own voice.

The reason why he did not feel his guts being pressed up into his body like when he was riding a rollercoaster was probably because he was not seated. Or perhaps it was because air pressure supported his entire body.

“Nooooooooouuuwaaaaaaarrrrghhhh!”

All around him, he could see the sea of stars in the night above and the lights of the city spreading across the land.

This isn't falling, but flying

— for a moment he had the mistaken impression that this was the case.

Itami could no longer trust his senses, so he looked at his wrist-mounted altimeter. The needle seemed to be turning as fast as the second hand on a watch.

“Oh crap!”

He had to pull the ripcord on his reserve chute right away.

However, he needed to take a stable descent position before doing so.

If he opened the parachute now, he would probably be tangled up with the risers. That was certain death.

“9000, 8000, 7000...”

Their speed was such that they were falling 1000 feet per five seconds.

His ears hurt every few seconds which passed. He swallowed to equalize the pressure, but right after that, his ears would ache again. Therefore, he had to balance himself.

“This could be bad!”

If this went on, the AAD (automatic activation device) would trigger.

Itami hurriedly opened his arms and bent his knees so he looked like he was drawing a bow.

His belly was thrust out, so he looked like a prawn. And then, he frantically opened his arms and raised his forehead. The world began to spin in an instant.

“5000, 4000!”

Itami forcefully yanked the ripcord.

He immediately felt the reserve chute at his back flap and flutter as it was dragged out, and right after that there was a

click

and a feeling of full-body suspension through the safety straps fastened around him.

“Guwaaargh!”

He looked up and saw that the ropes from his shoulders and the rectangular ram-air parachute above him filled the heavens.

Their descent had slowed. There was no unnatural turning. It would seem the parachute had successfully deployed.

“Yahoooooooooo! This is it! This is it!”

Suddenly, Tuka’s joyous cries filled the air.

“Are you trying to kill yourself, Tuka!? It’s all because you raised that death flag! Skydiving’s really dangerous, you know! In the first place, why did you even say that!?”

“Aw, it’s embarrassing, I won’t say it again! Besides, we’re not dead, what’s wrong with that?”

“Honestly, our altitude now is...”

He looked at his wrist altimeter and found that the needle was hovering around 3000 feet.

A chill ran down his back when he thought about how they would have gone splat if he had been just ten seconds later. After that, he asked Tuka what she really meant, and at the same time Itami pulled on one of the parachute’s steering toggles.

The centrifugal force felt like they were being swung around on a gigantic swing, and they began to turn slowly.

Since Itami was not confident in his ability to steer precisely, he shouted to Tuka, “I’ll leave guidance to you.”

Tuka had been squealing in delight until just now, but she replied, “Leave it to me, it’s a piece of cake!” and then she began to incant in a language Itami did not understand. It sounded like singing.

And then, a wind that had come out of nowhere steered Itami and the others toward the dome that covered the Gate in the heart of Ginza.

When they drifted to the right, the wind blew from the right, and when they leaned too far from the left it would come from the left.

He took off his goggles and put his night vision gear to his eyes. He could see the chaotic scene of the riot police spraying their water cannons and the international NGO protestors throwing rocks at them.

It would seem nobody had noticed Itami and the others descending through the sky overhead.

“You see that round roof? We need to land on top of that. There’s an emergency exit there.”

“It’s a very delicate maneuver, can you do it?” he asked, but there was no reply

“Oi~ Can you hear me~”

Tuka seemed lost in controlling the wind and walking through the sky. With both hands full with his nightvision gear, he gently nibbled her long elven ear. Tuka went “Kya~” and shrank down.

“What, whatwhatwhat, what are you doing!?”

“We need to land on top of that round thing. I’m counting on you.”

“Of, of course, leave it to me.”

Saying so, the Elven elementalist erected her index finger and waggled it around, stirring up the air.

Unlike round parachutes, ram-air parachutes were designed so they could move forward as they descended. Therefore, they could change their course. With this technology, they could freely select their landing destination. However, when they landed, they would not just be going down, but forward as well. Therefore, they would brake with devices called flares. However, the problem was that such brakes would only work on the parachute, and not on Itami and the others, dangling below the parachute.

Itami pulled hard on the toggles on both sides in order to slow them down.

However, that was wasted effort.

Tuka had gone to great effort to control the wind direction, and so when the parachute slowed down, it ended up stranding them in a very high place.

“Eh?”

In the end, Itami and Tuka swung back and forth on momentum, like they were on a swing, as they moved toward the big building in front of them.

Because the parachute slowed their descent, they ended up colliding with the ground... the roof of the dome halfway during a swing.

“Abbbbaaaahhhhh, koff, koff, ugeh!”

Itami landed on his ass with Tuka in his arms.

Tuka immediately worried that her weight had made that impact dangerous to Itami, but she could not move because of the safety harness.

“O wind!”

Tuka called to the wind in panic. Therefore, they were buoyed up by the parachute once more, and the two of them saw they were about to slide down the other side of the dome.

Itami hurriedly ejected the backup parachute and reached for a jutting out portion of the outer wall..

“Ahhhhhhhh!”

“Look out!”

It would seem they had successfully stopped their slide down.

The cast-off parachute was blown away by the wind, and draped over the wall of a nearby department store.

Just then, Itami felt his heart pounding as he realized his lifespan had been drastically cut short.

“So this is the power of a so-called death flag... If I hadn’t acted quickly, I’d have died... Tuka, are you alright?”

Tuka gasped, “I thought I was going to die~” as she looked at Itami’s arm —

which was supporting their combined body weight — as though it were glowing.

“My lifespan’s shrunk thanks to you!”

Itami exerted his strength and hoisted himself up with his arms alone.

“If I could share my lifespan, I’d give you 500 years.”

Don’t be silly.”

”I’m not kidding, I really want you to live for another 500 years.”

“ That’s crazy talk. If there really were such a way, it would shock the entire world.”

As they bantered with each other, the two of them climbed to the top of the dome, where he cut himself loose from Tuka. Thus freed, the two of them swiftly began to work.

“Tuka, take the rope out of the bag.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“We’re going to use it to sneak inside.”

He took out the shotgun that Kanou’s secretary had given him and loaded it with two shells. He fastened the rope Tuka handed him to a carabiner and hooked it to a metal bar on the hatchway, and then tied it to the figure-8 fastener of the parachute harness.

He opened the hatch in the ceiling and looked inside.

There were many people surrounding the Gate. Behind them were two trucks revving their engines. It was so loud it sounded like a skyscraper being demolished.

“What’s happening?”

“Something bad.”

Itami’s face blanched as he looked up and behind Tuka.

“Getlostgetlostgetlostgetlostgetlost!”

The Tomita and Kuribayashi team swooped down towards the roof of the

dome.

“What, what the hell are you doing, you idiots!?”

Itami bellowed at them, but it was clearly Itami’s fault. That was because there was only a narrow space near the top that they could aim for if they wanted to land on the dome. When one considered the fact that the other two had not yet landed, they should have made space and waited for them to arrive.

Itami thought, Crap, we’re going to crash!

and so he pushed Tuka down. At the same time, Kuribayashi glided feet first into Itami’s crotch, sending him flying into the hatch in the dome’s roof.

“Now, please let them pass!”

Liu demanded that Hazama let Ling and the others — who were being blocked off by JSDF personnel — go past. But Hazama immediately denied him.

“I refuse. We will not negotiate with criminals.”

“We have a hostage. What happens if you lose her? Then you’ll really be unable to open the Gate. You’ve been able to take a hardline stance all this while because you have her, right?”

Hazama was depressed by the fact that this secret, which was something which only the highest-ranking officers knew, had been so easily divulged.

“I see. So this bg production was aimed at seizing her.”

“I told you, this was just one of our aims.”

“But even so, you can’t harm her. She cannot be used as a hostage.”

“You really think so?”

“Of course. You’re planning to ask her help, but what happens if you get her angry?”

“Indeed. But we do not value her for her appearance. A finger, a hand, a foot; we won’t mind cutting them off at all.”

“If you do that, then she’ll never listen to you!”

“Certainly, she won’t. Not in the short-term, at least. But the human will is something which can be broken by their surroundings. After all, we can use drugs too.”

“What are you saying? You’re going to brainwash her?”

“It’s just to show that there are many methods at our disposal. Even an Emperor can be made to say that he’s a good communist. There’s always a way to deal with the so-called human spirit.”

In these negotiations, the more ruthless side had an advantage.

When choosing one’s methods, the side that empathized with the suffering of others would be at a disadvantage.

“Sniper in position.”

The staff officer then said, “Take aim at that woman,” but Hazama said, “Wait.”

There was more than one person here who was going to harm Lelei. If they could not neutralize everyone at once, then there was no point in doing this.

“Now then, what will you do? I’ll get this out of the way first, I have no intent of letting you buy time.”

On Liu’s command, Ling moved her knife to Lelei’s heart.

Hazama could only tell his subordinates, “make a path.”

And so Ling and the others leisurely walked through the Gate and returned to their fellows. As they were showered by arrogant jeering, the JSDF troops could only suppress the anger welling up from their bellies and grit their teeth.

“So how does it feel, are you mad!?”

Perhaps it was to savor her superior position, but Ling Fanghua held Lelei close to herself while pressing her knife to her breast, then turned back. Lelei’s eyes were covered, her mouth was gagged, her limbs were bound, and there

was no telling if she was still conscious, only that she looked utterly exhausted, like a doll. Ling tapped Lelei's cheek with the back of her knife, as if to show that she held the power of life and death over the girl and the JSDF personnel.

"Dammit!"

One of the JSDF personnel rushed over in anger, but his comrades immediately shouted, "Wait!" "Bear with it!" and held him down.

Seeing this, Ling had a look of unrivalled joy on her face as she laughed smugly.

"Ahahahahahaha! How is it, you really are mad, aren't you? Ah~ this feels great."

Liu grinned in victory, and he signalled to the truck drivers behind him.

A terrifying roar filled the dome. Their engines revved, and the echoes within the dome made everyone clutch their ears.

"Don't tell me, you—turen"

"Oh yes. You're going to be drifters."

At Liu's direction, the two big trucks each rushed toward the corners of the Gate's pillars. That was where they were weaker.

"Look out!"

The personnel in the Gate hurriedly backed off.

There was the sound of metal twisting, and the trucks hit the outer frame of the Gate. Part of the frame buckled under the impact, and it shook violently.

"Fall back, fall back!"

In order to evade the concrete and other debris falling on their heads, Hazama's men fled the vicinity of the Gate. All they could do was watch helplessly as the enemy did whatever they wanted and tremble in utter humiliation.

As Liu saw how the Gate remained in shape despite the tremendous impact, he looked back to Major Wu.

"It looks surprisingly intact. I thought we'd destroy it in one go."

“I think hitting it another couple of times ought to bring it down.”

The drivers stepped on the gas and the truck engines roared even more loudly as the trucks reversed away from the Gate.

There was the sound of the Gate’s frame twisting and tearing as the right side barrier broke apart, and fragments fell to the ground. The part of the Gate frame where the trucks had hit it was heavily twisted, scattering concrete and stones all over.

After backing up enough to accelerate, the drivers switched gears.

The staff officers saw this and they shouted to Hazama.

“General! We can only stop them by force! Please order us to open fire!”

“No, we can’t! Our country will be in deep trouble if they report that we opened fire on civilians!”

“Surely those people aren’t ordinary civilians, are they!?”

“It’s not what we think, it’s what others see! There’s a lot of people out there trying to make us out to be people who’ll kill civilians! Bear with it, all of you!”

“Dammit!”

Unable to quell their anger, the servicemen pointed their weapons at the trucks, but the officers stopped them. Seeing this, Liu signalled the trucks forward again.

As though they were trying to see who could accelerate faster, the trucks crashed heavily into the Gate once more.

The tremendous blow sent concrete chunks and rocks falling from the Gate’s outer frame.

“What a shame. Again!”

The trucks reversed once more. The voice that said, “Vehicle reversing, please be careful” sounded like a death knell to everyone.

However, a voice said, “What the hell are you doing!?” signalling the arrival of a third party.

Liu had an annoyed look on his face as he looked back. Wu ordered his men to block the interlopers trying to get in from outside the dome.

However, Liu could not simply overlook them either, because the third parties had weapons, which they held high as they rushed into the dome.

Unlike the JSDF personnel, who would hesitate when cameras were raised, the newcomers clearly did not care if they faced innocent civilians or whatnot, and so Liu's men hesitated.

"Director Liu. Your actions were not covered in the pre-mission briefing."

The masked men all held guns. Only their representative showed their face.

They were probably a coalition of American, English and French operatives.

"Jenkins. You're the ones making trouble for us by taking this unplanned action. I should be in charge of this place. You're causing me a lot of problems by barging in here."

"We'd like to respect the division of duties too, but your actions have surpassed the threshold we can permit. Our aim should be to apply pressure to force the Japanese government to give in. Why have you taken direct action like this?"

"Because the JSDF refused to agree to our requests. We simply went a little overboard in showing our determination."

"At a glance, it's clear that you've gone too far. The fact is, if the Gate is destroyed, there's no point in negotiation, no?"

"That is also a valid negotiation tactic. What's this, you started by saying you didn't want to sour relations with Japan and so you pushed the dirty work to us, but now you're complaining about our methods?"

"Don't play dumb. Your full-court press strategy's to obtain that Jade Wall girl, isn't it?"

That put a dent in Liu's soaring spirits, but he immediately pulled himself together and stepped forward.

“You’re the ones trying to steal her from us!”

“What, you noticed?”

“The strange thing was how America, the world’s policemen, would yield command authority to us. Of course we smelled a rat.”

“Ah, what’s going on? Does anybody know?”

Hazama’s staff officers asked around for an answer, and so Hazama sighed and told them.

“In short, the Americans sensed China’s aims and pretended to be tricked. They were planning to wait until China got her and then snatch her.”

Liu nodded to show he was correct.

“Just so. At the same time, we too knew that America had realized from the beginning.”

Liu took out a hidden handgun and pointed it at Jenkins.

Wu and the others took that as the cue to draw their hidden weapons. The operatives pointed their weapons at each other, and a tense silence filled the interior of the dome.

But right after that...

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Someone fell from above and behind Ling, who was holding Lelei, soaring over the heads of the JSDF soldiers on the Special Region side of the Gate.

Let us briefly go back in time to around 23:00.

It was nighttime in Akasaka, and the black Benz reflected the brilliant neon lights as it wove through the cars and stopped in front of a high-class hotel.

The face of the person in the back seat was unclear due to the tinted windows of the vehicle, but Komakado, who was looking down on them from inside the

hotel, knew that was his target.

Beside him, the agent operating the camera which had been set up to gather photographic evidence pressed the shutter.

The hotel valet opened the car door, and a distinguished-looking man of about 70 and a girl of about 15 in a dress stepped out of the car. Their closeness felt unnatural, and they did not look like a grandfather walking with his daughter.

“Dammit, that girl’s Turen Huna!”

The cameraman shouted all of a sudden, and everyone looked at him.

“Turen... who?”

“Turen Huna. She’s an East Asian superstar. And she’s only 16!”

The man immediately recited a list of facts about her, from her most recent dramass to her favorite foods, without consulting a fact sheet.

“Don’t tell me... you’re a fan?”

“I’m Member Number 0003 of her fan club.”

The agent pulled out his member card like he was flashing his police ID. Komakado did not know if he should comfort him or be shocked, but he pitied him, in a way.

“You know, if that Huna girl really is a star like you say, then I wonder how come someone like you could get such a low number like 0003.”

“Eh? Of course it’s because I was the first to notice her charm. It felt like lightning in the moment I saw her...”

Member 0003 narrated the tale of the wondrous moment when he first saw her and the beauty of her voice.

“But... How did you learn about her? From her home country?”

“No...”

“Which means that before you knew, there were only two other fans?”

“Eh? No! How could that be... but, er, eh?”

“You were tricked by TV advertising.”

Komakado told him he had never heard of the name Huna before.

“I’m sure she’s been heavily promoted because the stations have the copyright to her songs. And so, fans like you are tricked because you mistakenly think she’s a star.”

“Ehhhhh!?”

“Otherwise, why would a star be involved in the idol sex industry?”

Member 0003’s face froze, like he had heard an announcement that the world was coming to an end. It was pitiful, but Komakado had nothing to say to him.

The other agents looked at Member 0003 with pitying looks on their faces.

“Ch-chief. Everyone’s in place... what should we do?”

“Have we obtained the warrant?”

“Yes, it’ll be here right away. But is this really alright? Director Hidaki is a close friend of Prime Minister Morita’s, we might end up facing pressure too.”

“You don’t need to worry about Nagata-cho. There’s a big operation going on tonight.”

“Do you know about it?”

“It’s a secret. Alright, just wait for the time to come.”

Under Komakado’s instructions, his men relaxed and went to get coffee play with their phones or watch TV. But then Member 0003, who had hung his head like he had been broken, suddenly jumped up and shouted:

“I can’t forgive Turen or the idol sex industry! I’m going in right away!”

“Quick, stop that idiot now!”

The agents all went up to retrain Member 0003. It would seem he was very skilled in hand to hand combat, so even half a dozen people had a hard time subduing him. After they bore him to the ground, the immobilized Member 0003 wept piteously.

“Stop crying! What a pain!”

“But, but I...”

“Yes, yes, I know. I’ll let you question him.”

“Guuuh, you bastard. I’ll make you spit it out, I’ll make you tell me all about it. I’ll make you tell me everything you did with Huna-chan! I’ll reveal the true face of the organization behind the idol sex industry!”

In the grip of his negative emotions, the agent began muttering to himself like he was chanting a curse. Komakado could not bear to look any more. He turned away and mumbling, “that’s how it is, that’s how it is,” before sitting down on his chair and reaching for the cigarettes in his breast pocket.

The smoke from the cigarette curled up to the ceiling, floating there like mist.

Finally, when the hand on his watch neared two in the morning, there was a knock on the door.

The person who entered was one of his men. He entered briskly, and produced a brown envelope from his bag when he spotted Komakado.

“That’s the arrest warrant, and that’s the room key. At 2:00am, you are to arrest all twelve tourists recorded on the group’s namelist at once.”

Komakado verified the contents of the letter and smiled.

“Good. Then let’s go execute the warrant. However, the suspects are all big shots. Everyone, be careful when you do things.”

The formally dressed men gathered and strode swiftly down the carpeted hallways.

The sight of them was quite bizarre, and the other guests backed away from them with surprised looks on their faces. Komakado walked leisurely at their head, holding his cane.

The men stood in front of the door, surrounding it.

On Komakado’s command, one of the agents inserted the keycard.

“It’s time.”

Komakado nodded, and the door opened without any resistance.

The policemen of the Public Security Bureau poured into the room like a flood.

One of Komakado's men held a camera. His flash went off over and over again as he took pictures for evidence.

"You, you lot! Who are you!?"

Komakado took out his arrest warrant, and informed the man that he was under arrest.

"Director Hidaki, you're under arrest on suspicion of violating the Child Welfare Act. By the way, the girl here is 16 or so... looks like we caught you in the act."

The flash went off several times as they took pictures of the scene on the bed. There was a naked old man lying face up and a young girl shaking her waist on top of him.

There was a bottle of mineral water and erectile dysfunction pills on the bedside table. There was also traces of white powder and a straw.

However, the girl's hips were still moving even now.

She did not seem to be paying attention to what was happening around her. She stared into space with vacant eyes. Most likely she had been drugged with something.

Komakado smiled wickedly and looked on the girl like he was licking her with his eyes.

"What's this? She's just a brat, but she's certainly a very good woman. This clearly isn't her first time doing this...:"

With that, he smiled to Hidaki like the Grim Reaper himself.

"It seems you're quite skilled at making good memories as head of a television station, aren't you? But it seems you've gone a little too far. Word to the wise, our questioning is going to be quite rigorous. Especially this lad over here. He's a big fan of this girl, and he's hopping mad. He'll tie you up tight, and it won't be like the detective dramas your station likes airing so much..."

"I, I want my lawyer."

At great length, Hidaki finally managed to spit those words out.

“That is your privilege, of course, and we will respect that. However, before your lawyer arrives, your personal safety will be in the hands of Public Security. Get that into your head.”

“You, you, you’re from Public Security? I’m very close to Morita. The likes of you...”

“When you address Prime Minister Morita, you’ll soon have to add ‘former’ in front of that.”

“What, what did you say?”

“In any case, we’re going to have a good long chat about a certain country. We’ll tie you up nice and tight until you squeal. Of course, for transparency, you do know we’ll have to put everything on film, no? We’ll have you face the camera and tell it everything. All the things which make the court audience blush to hear.”

He called over a female agent to drape a towel over the girl and take her to another room.

After that, Hidaki was not permitted to dress himself. Instead he put on a bathrobe and had handcuffs around his wrists and a rope around his waist before he was led out through the hotel’s back door,

Komakado announced that their work here was done.

“Alright, ladies and gentlemen. It’s time to flush out the maggots nesting in our nation! It’s payback time!”

At the Prime Minister’s Residence, Morita faced his visitors in the middle of the night.

It was ridiculous to visit someone else about a matter like this. But before Morita could go to bed, the entire Cabinet had told him there was something important, so he could not refuse it.

He told his secretary to 'have them wait in the lounge' and chose to entertain his guests.

"What's everyone doing here at this time?"

That said, Morita was not properly dressed, with only a cardigan over his pajamas. Facing him was Kanou in immaculate attire, representing the Cabinet, and he said:

"I do apologize for coming at this hour... but the matter is pressing."

"Well, I am the Prime Minister. If it's important, then it can't be helped. What's happened now?"

"In truth, we would like you to step down from your position as Prime Minister."

Kanou went straight for that declaration without any preamble. Morita wondered if he had misheard things, and he adjusted his glasses before saying:

"What. what did you just say?"

Kanou had no intention of repeating himself. Instead, he said, "Read this" and handed a letter of resignation to him. It also included the letters of resignation for all the cabinet ministers besides Morita and Cabinet Secretary Kogure.

"Why!?"

Morita thumped the table.

"We feel your judgement about the Gate is in error. We will not allow you to hand jurisdiction of the Gate to the Permanent Members of the UNSC."

"But if all of you want to resign, then I'll simply appoint new ministers."

"That assumes you can find someone willing to do the job. I hope you understand why we have all gathered here."

Morita's strategy was to balance the parties, and so he had appointed various members from the various conservative parties to his Cabinet. The fact that they were all here implied that all their parties were aware of this.

"Who, whoever becomes Prime Minister won't have much of a term. He'll just be an interim manager until the general elections. Who do you think is going to

do that job?”

“I will. That’s because it’s better than letting you mess this country up.”

“Then what do you expect me to do!?”

“Believe in your men. Who the hell do you think you are, conceding the matter of the Gate and abandoning those people in the field who worked so hard!? Miss Lelei’s protection included, all you needed to do was trust in the people on the scene and wait. But you couldn’t do that. And now, thanks to you, we’re going to hand our country’s safety over to other nations!”

“But, but, what other way is there... who do you think is going to take the blame if something goes wrong!?”

“That is why I’m going to free you from that responsibility. Just leave it all to me...”

“No. I am the Prime Minister. I am the Prime Minister!”

Morita rose and picked up his phone to call the leader of his party.

It was late at night, yet the person he was calling answered after only a few rings. Clearly, he had been waiting for this call. However, Morita was so desperate that he did not realize how strange that was.

“Ah, Takatsu-san. This is bad. Kanou, Kanou wants me to resign from my Prime Minister’s position...”

“Morita-kun. You are not suitable to be the Prime Minister of this nation.”

“What!?”

“Don’t worry. Just vacate the Prime Minister’s seat. It’ll look neater if you do so of your own accord.”

“But, how, how about the elections?”

“If anyone who does it is going to lose, then let Kanou do it for a while. Your decisions will imperil the nation and I cannot support them.”

Morita hung up, and he dialled another number with trembling hands.

“Chief Executive Iwahara!”

“We have already decided to support Kanou. My apologies, but nobody in this nation will support you, former Prime Minister.”

“Ah, ahhhhhh...”

Morita dropped the phone and grabbed his head.

“Eh? What did you say? Our chief got arrested!? No way!”

After the power was cut, Ginza was plunged into darkness. Nanami dragged her cameraman all over the place, interviewing the members of the international NGO there, and then her colleague suddenly informed her of that.

“Child prostitution!? That’s super bad, isn’t it? There’s no way to excuse that kind of suspicion.”

Things like tax loopholes could still be argued in court.

One could mobilize an army of lawyers, pay off witnesses, and apply courtroom pressure to get people to reverse testimonies for unimportant cases. However, prostitution, and being caught in flagrante delicto

with a minor to boot, was the sort of thing that could not be covered up. If they tried to use legal tricks anyway, it was very likely they would be criticized for trying to inflict psychological damage on a minor, which would essentially be social death.

“And the girl is Turen Huna? Wah, she’s 16, this is terrible!”

“It’s not just the Chief either, it seems the name of the journalism department’s head appeared on that prostitution racket’s namelist, so he was taken in for questioning just now.”

“Eh, the Chief of journalism too!?”

“It seems they’re not just going after the financial sector, but it involves the

incumbent and opposition parties too. They're saying that the country is even searching the homes of powerful politicians! Public Safety is all over the place!"

That report stunned all the press staff present.

This might end up in a change in leadership for the television station. In that case, there might be a complete change in the prevailing direction of their department. These people had always had to stay wary of their superiors' moods, but now they did not know what was going on, they stopped thinking.

However, Nanami grinned.

"This is a chance! Let's put everything we've seen in Ginza into the news! Permission? Whose permission do we need? What right does someone who's been arrested have to give such permission? All we can do now is let the people decide!"

"But nobody'll see it now, it's three in the morning."

"Doesn't matter! The important thing is that it has to be shown on television! The people who watch late-night anime will see it! And if we play it once, it'll make it into the morning news! People will see it when they have their tea in the morning!"

Nanami spoke lightly of something that would anger the people who recorded late night anime.

"You'd better take responsibility for this."

"Just say I forced you to do it! And if anyone complains, just whisper 'the chief was arrested, and he sang like a canary, shouldn't you be running now'!?"

Nanami turned to face the cameraman.

"Sunagawa-kun, we're in this together! If anything bad happens, then my apologies. I can't pay you much, but I'll try and meet your requests as best I can, so please forgive me!

"No need to promise that, Nanami! Besides, I'm just a lowly reporter too. So how about letting me make a lewd tape of you!?"

The cameraman brought his lens closer, like he wanted to lick Nanami's arms and legs with it.

“Oi! Don’t tell me you’re going back on your word!?”

Nanami lightly knocked on the lens. The camera hit the cameraman in the face, and he wailed “gwaaaargh” before falling flat on his ass.

“Alright, let’s go, stand up! Take in everything around us, all 360 degrees! Broadcast what’s really happening in Japan! Add nothing and take nothing away, and pass no judgements! Send everything you see and hear! Don’t judge the morality of whatever you see. We’re here to collect footage. Let the audience debate about it! This is my way of journalism!”

Nanami shouted, “Let’s go!” and rushed in, trailing the cameraman behind her.

Chapter 9

“Ooogg! I, I’m going to die! I’m going to die! I’m going to die!”

Itami rolled around amidst the chunks of concrete and debris that had fallen from the Gate.

“Are, are you alright, el-tee!?”

Tomita, Kuribayashi and Tuka had come down right after him, and they ran over to Itami as he rolled around on the ground, heedless to the circumstances. The agents around them stared in stunned silence at this development.

The people present all had weapons drawn, and they were getting ready to kill or be killed. They they had not yet adjusted to that mood in the air being thoroughly shattered.

“Look what you did, Shino! How could Youji be alright after that!?”

Tuka worriedly ran over to Itami and put her hand on his back to help him sit up.

“P-please, please, Tuka, Stop shaking me. I’m still sore.”

Kuribayashi could not bear her guilt as she realized the magnitude of what she had done, and so she tried to duck her responsibility by saying, “Ah, let’s, let’s get this straight, it’s the el-tee’s fault for suddenly appearing in front of me.

But she was immediately rebuffed by Tuka.

“Are, are you kidding me!? What’ll you do if he can’t use it any more!?”

“What’s wrong with that, It’s not like it’ll inconvenience anyone, right!?”

“It’ll be troublesome for me!”

“Then what should I have done back then!?”

Tuka pointed at Kuribayashi’s chest and said, “You shouldn’t have kicked him, you should have just hit him with those. You’ve got such thick cushioning that it wouldn’t have ended up like this!”

“You, you want me to hug the el-tee!?”

Beside the feuding pair, Tomita broke out into a sweat as he hit Itami in the waist as hard as he could while going, “calm down, calm down.”

“What, what the hell are you all doing?”

The first person to react among everyone present was Hazama. He knew the intruders, so he was the quickest to snap back to reality,

“Ah, General!”

Tomita stood up to report, but one of Liu’s men shouted, drowning out his voice.

“Ling! Ling! What are you doing! Wake up!”

Looking back they saw that Ling — who had been holding the hostage — had fainted, probably because she had hit her head when she was being knocked away.

And so, Wolf and the others seized her without any resistance.

“Excellent, take her, take her!”

The Arnus townsfolk recovered Lelei too, and her safety was given over to the head chef.

Hazama was clearly relieved to see this, and he turned to address Liu and Jenkins.

“Looks like the tables have turned. The girl you wanted has come back to us.”

“Dammit! Give her to us!”

But Jenkins turned his gun on Liu.

“Things being what they are, there’s no point in resisting. You’ve failed! Give up and surrender!”

“As if! Besides, is America really going to allow Japan to monopolize the rights to the Gate!?”

“We are allies of Japan. We know where to find what we want. That being the case, all we need to do is conduct official diplomatic negotiations to have them give it to us. Our plan was always to take the Jade Wall from you by force when you took it from Japan. Now drop your weapons!”

Liu and Wu looked at each other.

They could not possibly beat both the US operatives and the JSDF at once.

Moreover, their hostage had also been taken back. The JSDF might have hesitated over shooting unarmed people, but now that Liu and the others carried weapons, they would probably open fire without hesitation. If fighting broke out, they could not defeat the Type 74 tank in the dome either.

“Director Liu!?”

“What, what a shame.”

Liu glared at Jenkins and Hazama, then put his gun down and raised his arms.

“Director, we can’t be taken alive.”

“I know, so are you ready?”

However, another voice interrupted this development.

“No! There’s no need to surrender!”

A cry came up from the Special Region’s side.

Who was that — everyone turned back to look.

This time, it was the head chef and Diabo who had a knife to Lelei.

“I don’t care who does it! Make me Emperor! I’ll be your puppet or whatever! How about it, Japanese general!? How about using me!? I’ll do a better job than Pina! I’ll make the Empire a vassal of Japan. How about it? I don’t care who uses me! Doesn’t anyone want me!?”

Perhaps Diabo had shouted all that because he had been pressed to his wits’ end.

Panache went pale, and she reproached Diabo:

“Your Highness! That’s pathetic! Do you know what you’re saying!?”

But Diabo decided to disregard her.

“I know, I know that, Panache. But if this goes on, I’ll never be able to amount to anything! In that case, I need to become famous, even if it’s actually infamy I

gain! I'd rather have people frown when they hear my name than have them say, 'Diabo... who's that?'"

"But in that case, the Empire—"

"Who cares about that? I am everything to me! Without me, there's no point in this world! A world that treats me unfairly and refuses to acknowledge me can go die in a fire! Alright, isn't there someone who'll use me? I'll do anything!"

"Your, your Highness!"

Panache crumpled to the ground. She knew that she could no longer persuade him.

"Diabo! I like your strength of spirit!"

However, someone answered Diabo's plea for approval.

"Who's that? Who wants to use me?"

Diabo searched for the person who wanted to employ him.

"Over here."

Rory showed herself. Everyone's eyes went to the person who parted the wall of people before her with one hand on her massive halberd.

"Your, your Holiness... Rory Mercury..."

Even Diabo was speechless. That was because he had not expected that one of the demigods, who typically distanced themselves from the Emperor and politics, would actually say they wanted to make him Emperor.

"Don't be mistaken. All I'm giving you is an opportunity."

"An, an opportunity, you say?"

"Yes... for some time now, I've been looking for someone to govern Arnus. You can be the puppet of the Arnus townsfolk, gather their opinions, and govern them. Let everyone decide what you'll do. Once this land is prosperous, you'll live a life as luxurious as the Emperor's... but if you fail..."

Rory touched her halberd to Diabo's neck.

“In any case, I’ll give you a first term of four years. If you do well, I’ll extend it by another four. If everyone puts their trust in you, it’ll keep renewing. How about that?”

“But, surely this land should belong to Nihon. In the first place, how should I develop this land? How about resources? How about talent?”

“That girl ought to know.”

Rory pointed at Lelei, who was being held by the head chef.

“Come to think of it, she mentioned something about inviting settlers here and building more towns like Arnus...”

The head chef shouted, “That’s impossible!”

After Diabo shut the head chef up with, “You’re a pain in the ass! Shut up! You’re not the one doing it! Don’t judge things by your standards!” Diabo pondered the matter again.

He acknowledged that he would need to discuss the plan with Lelei.

“It’ll surely be tough. If you don’t like it, you’re free to refuse.”

“Indeed, but...”

Diabo whispered back to Panache.

“Your Highness, please do it. It’s better than destroying yourself here asking for something impossible. Surmount the trial her Holiness has given you and redeem your name. If it works, you’ll go into the history books.”

“But will everyone accept me?”

Diabo looked around himself, at the Arnus townsfolk.

“Well. You did trick everyone once, so nobody’s going to trust you. It’ll be very hard to regain their trust again in a situation like this. But then the alternative is being forgotten, and wouldn’t death be better than that? In that case, you should be able to manage it.”

“Yes, that’s it. It’s exactly as you say.”

Diabo gulped.

Rory poked Diabo's neck with her halberd.

"You will become the puppet of the demihumans and paupers you've looked down upon all this while, their governor. While we can open the Gate again, and this land will become Japan's, if everyone accepts you as their leader... I think you said something about a 'chiji'?"

Rory turned a questioning look at Hazama, and he nodded.

"Becoming a 'chiji' means becoming the official who administers Arnus... '

Diabo replied, "So this 'chiji' thing is something like a regional governor. And if possible, it might be a stepping stone into Nihon's politics... then I'll do it. Please allow me to take on this task," Diabo nodded.

Rather than vanish here, Diabo decided that he would use this as a springboard for his future.

"Sunagawa-kun, over here, this way!"

Trailed by her cameraman, she infiltrated the Ginza Garrison that was the NGO's base and began interviewing people. After speaking to the people here, she discovered that the NGO's members, who hailed from many nations, had decided to take the Ginza Garrison but had not decided what to do after that.

"Who could we talk to in order to learn about the situation?"

"I don't know. Surely the organizers would know, though?"

She got the same answer from everyone she asked.

Quite a few of them were suspicious about the unplanned takeover of the Ginza Garrison. Given what she had seen, once they got tired of the fuss, everyone would just up and leave. And in fact, while they might have resisted the police fiercely, quite a number of protestors had slunk out of the public view and taken their leave.

"I'd like to interview the organizers. Where are they?"

There was a black man hoisting a placard demanding recompense for the

foreigners killed in the Ginza incident. Nanami called out to him, and after speaking to him, he told her, “They went into the dome to negotiate with the Japanese soldiers from the Special Region. But it’s best you didn’t go near. The Japanese soldiers from the Special Region aren’t like the ones over here, they’ll open fire on you...”

Perhaps everyone had stayed away because they believed the JSDF personnel would shoot with little provocation. However, Nanami felt that this was where the heart of the protestors lay, and knowing she would be placing herself in danger, she approached the dome.

“Alright, we’re done here.”

After seeing this sequence of events, Hazama breathed a sigh of relief before turning to Liu.

“Now that things have ended up like this, what do you intend to do?”

“How, how, how could this be!? Diabo, you’ve been tricked. Hand the girl over. If you do, I’ll make you a real Emperor.”

After Panache translated, Diabo replied:

“I won’t believe you anymore. In order to become an Emperor, I’ll need a great deal of military might, and you haven’t brought that with you. And you even tried to destroy the Gate. I will obey Her Holiness and become the puppet of Arnus’ townsfolk. I will become the regional governor of this territory. That’s a more realistic goal.”

“Dammit.”

Now that Liu was out of options, he turned back to Major Wu.

“In this case... Major, you understand, don’t you?”

“Yes. We can’t be arrested.”

After doing all this, their country’s foreign relations would be in trouble if they were taken alive. In order to prevent such an occurrence, the operatives here

would have to flee or die. Of course, suicide was a last resort. Fortunately, they were not surrounded. It would not be impossible to escape the dome.

After thinking about this, Major Wu signalled a general retreat to his men.

They pulled out offensive grenades and smoke bombs and threw them to the ground.

The battle in the dome was on the airwaves, just in time for the people on their long commutes and the people preparing for work and having breakfast to see it. Even the ones who were half-asleep woke all the way up the moment they saw the news.

“What, what’s this?”

Billowing white smoke filled the air and there was the sound of explosions and bullets flying.

This scene, which might have come from an action movie, froze the tea-drinking salarymen mid-sip.

“An intense battle is taking place between an armed group and the JSDF!”

Sunagawa’s camera captured Liu and his men firing wildly through the smokescreen.

Nanami asked Sunagawa to film their weapons.

“What’s happening in Ginza!? This was supposed to be a peaceful protest, but why are they all carrying weapons and shooting each other!?”

Nanami shouted so loudly that it overloaded the camera’s speaker.

Below the bullets flying around the Gate, Tuka, Tomita and Kuribayashi moved Itami to safety.

“El-tee, stand up quick!”

“I, I can’t. It really hurts!”

However, Itami knew he had to get somewhere safe, and as the smoke from

the smoke bombs and the exhaust of the Type 74 tank filled the surroundings, he forced himself to his feet.

The ricochets bouncing off the tank's armor and the bullet fragments grazed Itami and Tuka.

"Kyaah!"

"Get down! Get down!"

The bullets after that struck the nearly-destroyed Gate, gouging out chunks. Thanks to that impact, a big rock began falling from it.

As mentioned earlier, structures made by stacking stones could only stand because each part was in the right place. Even if only one component was missing, it might result in a catastrophic collapse. Moreover, the Gate was already half-wrecked because of the trucks ramming it. The fact that it was not yet destroyed was truly a mystery. The keystone, made of several small rocks, was what barely kept it standing. They promptly fell.

In other words, that was the last straw.

The battle for Formal Manor had turned into a chaotic melee.

The Haryo warriors Bouro had sent were singlemindedly rushing into the depths of the manor house, headed for the Emperor's bedroom.

In order to stop them, House Formal's private troops and battle maids stepped up to hunt down the interlopers. However, the Haryo warriors fought without any concern for their lives, and so bloody battles broke out all over the place.

"Huu..."

The corridor was stacked with the bodies of soldiers, and a Haryo warrior pressed on his knee to get to his feet.

"Korme, Nerya... is anyone still alive!?"

Nobody answered his call.

He looked around and saw that his friends lay dead among the bodies of the demihuman battlemaids. They must have fought to their very last breath.

“Dammit... Bouro, you bastard!”

Uxi spat the name out, as though merely vocalizing it had stained his mouth. Then, he leaned against a wall and limped ahead.

“That bastard left this shitty job to us, he must be trying to use us to make a name for himself!”

Their aim was to infiltrate the Empire, spread through it, and devour it.

That was not a bad plan. However, the only one who would enjoy its fruits was Bouro, while he and his buddies ended up doing dirty work like this.

“Motherfucker...”

Was he cursing Bouro, or himself, for obeying orders and taking part in this mission where he would have to bet his life? Uxi was not sure either. All in all, everything upset him.

He walked down along the corridor, and his eyes met a cat-eared maid coming the other way, holding her arm.

“Dammit.. Another enemy, huh?”

As he saw that her skirt was so short that it no longer qualified as part of a maid’s uniform, Uxi wished that he had met her elsewhere.

She has great legs, he immediately thought.

“Nya? They’ve gotten all the way in here?”

The enemy had penetrated far deeper than she had expected, and in order to eliminate him, Persia reached for her inner thighs. However, there were no more daggers there.

“Oh no, I’m out of knives ~nya.”

“What, empty-handed? Then get out of my way. I’ll let you go, so just back off.”

“I can’t ~nya. This manor is my manor ~nya.”

“You say it’s yours? You’re just a demihuman maid for a noble house and you say this place is yours?”

“Yes ~nya. This is our home *nya*. *What’s wrong with saying it’s ours nya?*”

Saying so, Persia reached behind her waist and pulled out a tanto with a reverse grip.

“Kurata-san gave me this knife ~nya.”

Katanas were permitted to be made as works of art. However, certain bladesmiths made their knives as weapons more than as artistic pieces.

The words carved on it read “Man-Carving Butcher Knife. It was as heavy as a bill, and just as tough.

The hilt was wrapped with paracord, and its tempered blade shone with the light of sharpness.

Kurata had spent the money he had saved from two years of living in barracks to buy this for Persia.

He actually bought a knife for a woman?

That thought had occurred to her as well. However, to Persia the battle maid, weapons were something that her life depended on. Persia would surely be happy to receive a nice present, and once she was moved, she would not be able to reject him and she would finally accept his love — that was what he believed.

“It cuts really well ~nya.”

As he saw the light gleaming off the honed edge, Uxi trembled for a moment.

“You serve a noble, yet you claim this place is yours. Is that why all the maids here were so hard to deal with? But I can’t lose here!”

Their battle cries tore through the air between them, and that signalled the start of the battle.

“Haaah, haah, hah...”

Shandy had been given the task of serving as the last line of defense for the

Emperor's chambers, and she fought battle after battle against the Haryo warriors.

Holding her saber in one hand, she nimbly moved her body and took aim at her foes' limbs. She did not make grand flourishes, but rather, she sliced at her enemies' vitals with the minimum possible movement. However, even after stabbing them in their vitals, her enemies tried to grab her with both hands or bite her with their fangs, all to try and break through the final barrier in their way.

They firmly believed that so long as they did a bit of harm to Shandy or give her some pain, their friends behind them would eventually be able to break through Shandy the obstacle. Their belief slowly became reality.

Suisses took her enemy's charge, prepared to die with him, and fell after exchanging stabs with her foe.

That left Shandy, who was covered in wounds dripping with fresh blood.

"Hah!"

A bit of luck saved Shandy, and after feinting, she thrust deeply into her enemy's chest.

She almost could not pull back her sword due to her enemy's weight. Even ripping it out, flesh and all, was also very difficult. After exerting all her strength, she pulled her sword free and collapsed on her butt.

"Hah, hah, hah!"

The edge of her saber was chipped, and the clotted blood dulled its edge. She was covered in wounds, but she did not feel pain so much as heat. The fingers of her left hand could no longer move freely. Perhaps her arm had been wounded. Perhaps her enemies' blades were poisoned.

Her hands were trembling, her legs were trembling, and her voice was trembling.

"Hah, hah, hah... I guess nobody'll want to marry me now... huh."

She was covered in wounds. She might have to find a weird man — one who would not mind her baring her flesh in bed.

“Ah, yes.”

If her enemies’ blades were poisoned, then she could not just sit idle. She sucked out as much blood and poison as she could fill her mouth with and then bound her wounds with a handkerchief.

If it was a fast-acting toxin, then it would probably be pointless, but it was better than doing nothing. That thought went through her mind as she carried out the procedure.

“Hah...”

She checked again. There were roughly ten bodies around her. That meant there would be nobody else coming — if only she could believe that. However, Shandy sensed two more people approaching.

“Come on, give me a break. I don’t want to die.”

Shandy fought back the urge to cry, and hoisted herself back onto her feet by pressing on her knee.

After that, she levelled her saber at them and shouted, “Who goes there!? This is his Majesty’s bedchamber; are you still going to be so rude!?”

I told them the Emperor was here while questioning them

— that thought flashed through her head. However, that was the way a palace guardian did things.

Shandy stretched out her hunched back so she could stand straight up and then faced forward.

Then, she suppressed a bout of panting, affected a calm smile, and asked again;

“Who goes there!?”

And then, a man and a woman emerged from the darkness. The man looked like an older human male, but he seemed to have the blood of other species mixed into him. The problem was the woman. Shandy remembered that woman.

“Don’t tell me, it’s you?”

The person in front of Shandy was Nora, and it would seem Nora remembered Shandy as well, because her attitude seemed to say, “is that you?” as well.

“I don’t think I’ll make it.”

Knowing she had no chance to win, Shandy bit her lip.

Furuta grabbed Tyuule’s hand and they left the camp.

Borhaus had let them go.

“In other words, you’re not a supply trooper, but Zorzal-sama’s chef, and you came to this camp in order to take this woman away?”

“Er, yes, that’s it.”

“How did you do it? The journey here was top secret.”

“I snuck into Zorzal-sama’s luggage.”

No matter what route they took, Zorzal’s belongings would eventually end up by Zorzal’s side.

Borhaus could swallow the story that Zorzal’s personal chef could easily sneak into his cargo train.

And then, he studied Tyuule, who was embarrassedly hiding behind Furuta.

“I see... indeed, it seems that woman has special feelings for you.”

However, Furuta had a look of surprise on his face as he asked, “Really?” His expression suggested he did not know how Tyuule felt for him.

“If not, then why would that bold woman suddenly become a meek little maiden? That’s because you showed up. Why else would she do that unless she was in love with you? Don’t tell me you’re the sort of man who can’t tell a woman’s feelings unless she tells you straight up? What kind of a man does that make you, huh?”

“Er, ah, sorry. I really didn’t notice.”

He’s a total blockhead

— Borhaus threw a sympathetic look in Tyuule's direction.

"I understand. No matter the reason, you came to save this woman. The two of you should slowly figure out how you feel about each other afterwards."

"Mm, I'll talk with her about it."

"Right, understood. Then take her and run! Don't get caught by anyone! Even if you do get caught, don't mention my name!"

"But... won't this cause trouble later on?"

"The supply troops were never figured into our fighting strength, so we'll figure something out. And as for this woman, that Bouro chap is the one they'll question, not me."

And so, Furuta left Zorzal's camp with Tyuule. They headed for the helicopter landing site.

Furuta lent his kantoï to Tyuule, and took out a map and a compass from the bag on his shoulder. He studied the terrain around him and found the direction where he should go.

"That hill is 323 and that swamp is 53..."

"Haaa, haa... Furuta-san, where are you going?"

"I'm going to Arnus. They've sent out an evacuation preparation order, so someone will come get us. You'll be fine once we get there. Come on."

"Really? You're taking me with you?"

Tyuule looked at Furuta in a vaguely suspicious way.

She had not expected anyone to rescue her, to take her away... it was impossible, it could not be — she had denied it all this time. She could not believe something like this could happen.

"Didn't you tell me that I needed to show that I'd snatch you away? I'm taking you with me. Please help me with my shop."

"Your shop? I, I can't, not someone like me... you saw it, didn't you!? Me, and those men..."

Furuta simply said "that's enough" to drown out Tyuule's words.

“In any case, please, just come with me! Nothing good will happen if you stay there! Alright, now stand up, we’ll be there once we get through this patch of forest.”

“I don’t believe it. I can’t believe it.”

“Trust me.”

Furuta put away his compass, then took Tyuule’s hand and ran once more.

Finally, they heard the sound of an engine in the distance.

They entered the forest, moved past the trees, then reached a large clearing, where a UH-1J helicopter was landed. It had already started its engine up while waiting for Furuta.

“Oh, you’re finally here.”

He looked over and saw Yanagida and his men were waiting for him.

“Oi, over here, hurry!”

The troopers raised their weapons and kept watch around themselves, and when they saw him, they breathed sighs of relief and waved him over to them.

“Great, you made it.”

“What are you saying, we waited so long for you, now we’re late!”

“We rushed all the way here too. Took us a lot of effort.”

Yanagida and the troopers boarded the helicopter. Furuta was going to board too.

And then, they found that there was a guest inside already. She was a girl who looked like she was in middle school, holding a big bag.

“Yanagida-san, who’s this?”

“This girl is the Imperial ambassador to Japan. I’ll tell you the details later. Come, get on.”

“Er, alright.”

Furuta looked back and reached a hand out to Tyuule.

“Come, Tyuule-san, hurry.”

However, Delilah — who was waiting inside the helicopter — suddenly leapt at Tyuule as Furuta held his hand out to her.

“You traitor! Meeting me here is your end!”

A spray of blood followed Delilah’s shout.

“Wait, what are you doing, Delilah!?”

Furuta made to stop Delilah as he shouted in her direction.

“Mister Furuta, this is to make up for a sin, so please bear with it. She can’t be allowed to live! Because of her, our nation of Warrior Bunnies—!”

Although Furuta and Yanagida tried to stop her from either side, they ended up being dragged along by her.

Her target, Tyuule, backed off quickly, a knife sticking out of her left shoulder.

“Stop now, Delilah!”

“Master Yanagida, please forgive me, but I can’t let her live! Because of that traitor, we—”

“Now’s not the time for this!”

Furuta left Delilah to Yanagida, and ran over to Tyuule.

“Are you alright?”

“There’s no need to sympathize with her! Everyone had to suffer because of that woman! We were killed, we were enslaved, we were disgraced, we were bought and sold, we suffered...”

“Listen to me! It’s a mistake! It was all a conspiracy!”

“What do you mean a mistake!? Everyone suffered! Who’s going to believe you now!? It’s your fault! You’re the cause of all this! While we were going through hell, you became the toy of the enemy, turning your coat when it suited you, and now you’re planning to drag down Master Furuta!?”

Delilah, still restrained by Yanagida, shouted loudly and her body trembled.

“Master Yanagida! Just think of this as avenging a wrong or making up for past sins, but please let me kill her!”

However, Yanagida pinched Delilah's ear to turn her towards him, then coldly said:

"Shut up. If you don't listen to me, I'll abandon you here."

"Ah, noo! Please don't!"

"Then listen to me."

Yanagida ordered Delilah to get back on the chopper obediently.

"Get back on."

"Please, please don't leave me!"

"That's why I told you to get back on."

"I know, I'll be a good girl. Please."

Furuta saw that she had calmed down, so he invited Tyuule to board the chopper with him.

"That must hurt, huh. I'll give you a morphine shot, so please don't move the knife in your shoulder. If you pull it out now, it might cause bleeding. I'll get a doctor to look at it in Arnus, so please hang in there."

Saying so, Furuta took an injector from the first aid pouch and jabbed it into Tyuule's arms before bringing her aboard.

However, Tyuule looked at Furuta's face and her expression turned complicated.

"No... I won't go. I don't want to go."

"Lieutenant Yanagida. We ought to go, it's time."

Upon hearing the pilot's urging, Furuta shouted, "Wait a bit, I'll be right over."

However, Tyuule had suddenly backed off to avoid the hand Furuta was reaching to her, and smiled in a hateful way.

"You idiot. Why did you think I'd go with someone like you? Don't tell me you were mistaken because I was a little nice to you? Sorry about that. I'm not interested in you at all."

Perhaps a weaker man might have been defeated by such a cold statement.

But Furuta grit his teeth, like he had been slugged heavily, and then retorted:

“I know that. You’re Tyuule-san, queen of the Warrior Bunnies, and the favored slave of the Empire’s Crown Prince. How could you be the boss of a food stall? Still, you can say I don’t know my own limits, but I want to take you with me. I’ve already made up my mind.”

Tyuule froze, like someone had struck her.

“You idiot. You stupid man. You’re such a stupid man! Why do I have to go with you? Have some common sense. Go back to your country. Find a nice girl and open a little shop of your own.”

Tyuule glanced at the man who was in charge. Yanagida understood what it meant and signalled to his men to grab Furuta.

Even as they pinned him from behind, Furuta shouted, “Wait! Let go of me!”

“Take off!”

“Yup, moving out.”

Under Yanagida’s direction, the helicopter rose into the sky. It gradually drew away from the earth.

Tyuule continued looking at Furuta, who had his hand held out to her all this while.

“You can’t! You can’t leave Tyuule!”

Furuta’s voice delighted Tyuule for the first time in her life. She was certain that Furuta could make his dream come true. If she had made up her mind to go with him, she could have become part of his dream and become happy too. No, she would definitely have been happy. It was not optimism or hope, but a fact.

Even she — whose heart was filled with despair and destruction — could have chosen to be happy. Just that point filled Tyuule with the sheerest joy. One could say that was the best possible reversal of fortunes with which she could end her life.

Tyuule imagined the future Furuta had in mind — the future they would share.

The two of them would eat together in their empty store, easing the fatigue of their hearts and bodies from the day's work. As Furuta agonized over what color of wallpaper to use, she would suggest, "a light color might be good". That was neither a dream or an illusion, but a future that she could have chosen.

"Ahhh, it feels great!"

And so, without needing to hope, Tyuule's joy would be realized.

In that case, all she had to do now was finish up what was left. She had to put an end to things on the other side. Because that too was part of her fate, what she had determined for herself. If she did not do that, if all she did was enjoy her happiness, it would leave regrets in her heart.

"Ow, guh!"

Tyuule pulled out the blade stuck in her shoulder, gripping it with all the hatred of her tribe, and as she imagined the happiness she and Furuta would enjoy together, she ran to Zorzal's side with all her might.

"I can't see Beefeater-san anywhere!"

"Don't tell me!?"

As she heard the report, Pina suddenly stood up. The staff girls wailed and some cried. Beefeater was a straightforward person, and the lady knights admired her, and the old soldiers felt her tomboyish attitude were adorable.

But the White Rose banner was no longer visible amidst the fighting. Worse, there was a surge of enemy forces in its place.

"She won't die so easily, go check it out!"

She clutched her red hair as she gave her order, and then Pina called for Hamilton.

"Aren't they here yet!?"

"Not yet."

They were waiting for reinforcements.

It was true that, Zorzal attacking Italica by surprise was one of the first

scenarios they had envisioned.

No, one could say they had set themselves up to be ambushed easily. Therefore, Zorzal had not quit the field and fled, but had engaged them in a pitched battle.

But Kengun, the JSDF and the regular government's forces had not yet returned here.

They had waited and waited, but help had not arrived. Moments, seconds and minutes had passed. As they did, her men's lives faded away.

Pina bit her thumbnail. She bit so deeply that it bled, but her anger inured her to pain.

Gray Co Aldo looked sympathetically at Pina, but he was in charge of the infantry, so he gave orders to his men.

"The enemy's coming! Don't move before the NCOs give the order!"

A mixed Centaur and cavalry unit had emerged from the chaos of melee and they were thundering toward Pina's command unit.

They collided with the infantry. On Gray's command, the infantrymen thrust their pikes out at once, meeting the mounted charge head-on. The Centaurs ducked their heads in order to get past the forest of points. However, they were run through by the other pikes around them and they collapsed to the ground. Even so, the weight of their charge broke through the human wall, and upon seeing an opening, the enemy took it.

The pikes receiving the charge pierced through the bodies of horses, men and Centaurs alike.

Unable to bear the weight, the pikes snapped and cracked.

The riders in the rear trampled the corpses of horses and men and continued forward. The horses impaled by the pikes cried out in pain and thrashed about, striking the nearby footsoldiers. The infantry that were kicked by their hooves or trampled underfoot expired with a last gasp of pain.

A pile of corpses soon stacked up during the course of this intense melee.

At their head was Gray, who used the wall of the dead as an obstacle as he

fought. He was covered in arrow wounds and blood oozed out from all over his body.

“Now’s the time, beat them back!”

Spurred on by Gray as he swung his sword, the infantry advanced.

Buoyed by their momentum, they advanced the frontline 50 yuns forward before the enemy could finish their current attack. However, that did not alter the disadvantageous circumstances they were facing. The troops that broke out of the melee and rushed toward Pina’s headquarters only increased, and the number of friendlies who could maintain the line of battle and continue fighting had visibly decreased.

The infantry led by Gray were also flanked as they intercepted the enemy on either side, and they immediately lost the 50 yuns they had fought to gain. They wanted to fall back to consolidate their forces, but there was nowhere for them to retreat. This was because Pina was behind them.

Gray was fighting very close to Pina, and the blood from the enemies he smote splashed on Pina’s face.

“Your Highness, with all due respect, it is time you retreated back inside Italica.”

“No. I will not leave this place.”

“But if this goes on—”

“Deal with it.”

Even if you tell me to deal with it...

They had no reserves or traps laid beforehand. All Gray could do was encourage the men to fight hard.

No, they had already fought hard. During this long battle, every man had held the line, but now their stamina and strength were depleted. They could no longer fight hard, even if they wanted. However...

“Lalalalala!”

A troop of cavalry cried out like the wind as they returned from behind to

smite the foes in front of Gray in the back.

While there were only half their number from when they had first set out, the tattered banner depicting a white rose still fluttered at their head

“It’s the White Roses’ banner! It’s Beefeater-sama!”

“I knew she was still alive!”

“Was the report from earlier in error!?”

The staff girls exclaimed in delight.

Just as the men shouted her name, Bozes’ Yellow Rose knights returned as well.

They had returned to rescue Pina’s command, which was being threatened. However, that meant that they had abandoned the soldiers fighting at the frontline. They were the force supporting the line of battle, and after they pulled back, the line they had struggled so hard to maintain swiftly collapsed.

Helm clapped and shouted:

“Good, we’ve won!”

The battle-line of the legitimate government’s forces, led by Pina, finally collapsed under the repeated charges like a dam bursting.

“Your Highness! Zorzal-denka, now’s the time!”

“Hm, mm.”

At this moment, Zorzal also believed that victory was at hand. He even leaned forward past his horse. It was clearly evident how much he thirsted for victory.

Perhaps he sensed others looking at him, but Zorzal straightened up, coughed, and adjusted his bearing, then raised a hand and chopped it forward.

“All forces, charge!”

Helm thought, Zorzal was quite calm as he gave that order.

However, this uncharacteristic calmness was instead a sign of how excited Zorzal was. Yes, right now, Zorzal was so happy that he had forgotten himself.

That said, all this was irrelevant to his men. They would follow anyone's orders so long as they knew it would take them towards victory.

Upon receiving the order, the men marched forward as the coppery disc of the sun peeked out over the land, in order to trample the legitimate government's army underfoot. Pina's forces, situated at the gates of Italica, had already lost their coherence and were merely thrashing in pain.

Zorzal's horse moved forward, its hooves thundering the earth, and he spurred his speeding horse onward, feeling the glory that covered him.

Bathed in the exultant cheers of his men and his minister, filled with the joy of an Emperor, he raced out forward unto dawn with all his might.

But then there was darkness before him, as though the sun had been eclipsed.

Darkness filled the eastern sky.

The gale from the east blew with tremendous force, strong enough to fell trees, and heavy particles of sand blocked his vision.

And then, the earth trembled with a vibration that far surpassed those of the horses' hooves, telling Zorzal that an earthquake had come.

"The earth is shaking"

The ground shuddered violently. Even the four-legged horses were so startled they tripped and fell. The men could not remain standing and they collapsed one after the other.

"Save, save us!"

The cheers of imminent victory had turned to pleas for help and cries of despair.

The earthquake's magnitude was a 5(lower) on the JMA seismic intensity scale.

This earthquake was far more powerful than the one which had rocked the Imperial Capital, and the temblor at Italica seemed to signal the end of the world for the soldiers.

This earthquake had also affected the various combat groups heading back to Arnus.

“We’re almost at Arnus.”

“There’ll be a huge snarl-up if we approach Arnus... it won’t be so bad if we sort out traffic ahead of time.”

The commander of the first Combat Group, Colonel Kamo, spoke to Lt. Col. Tsuge.

“We won’t lose any vehicles from the convoy, will we?”

“Yes. Although each vehicle is spaced out from the others, they’ll all continue forward. However, since we were the closest to the Imperial Capital, we’ll probably be at the tail end. So the road ahead might end up being blocked and we won’t be able to advance.”

“If they give the White Rabbit order now, the consequences won’t bear watching... at the very least, we need to get our men back. We’d better prepare for the possibility of abandoning our vehicles by the roadside and having them run back. We’ll need to distribute the stores we need to bring back among the men.

“Roger. We’ll let the ones who want to stay behind deal with the abandoned vehicles, then.”

“According to the emergency response manual, White Rabbit means nobody stays, everyone returns. We can’t leave anyone behind, even if they want to remain here. That’s how it is.”

“Understood.”

However, a sudden sandstorm from the direction they were heading toward blocked their vision. The view outside their windows was soon occluded by cloudy darkness.

“Column halt! Halt! Halt!”

Kamo ordered everyone to stop in order to prevent an accident. Right after that, the tremor hit them.

“An earthquake!?”

“Looks like it. Pretty strong one too!”

Even for the Japanese, a magnitude 5 (lower) earthquake was not everyday fare.

That said, they were not worried about anything happening to the world. The personnel waited quietly, thinking that it would soon blow over. To them, the problem was not the earth shaking, but the problems that would accompany it.

“Maintain a lookout in all directions! Watch for fissures, avalanches and landslides!”

As the officers shouted their orders, the troopers stuck their faces out of the vehicle flaps to see what was going on and received a faceful of dust for their trouble.

“Can’t see shit, captain!”

“Dammit! Hold position for now!”

The sandstorm that heralded the earthquake faded away the moment the shaking stopped.

All that remained was the sand-covered scenery. The drivers dismounted and cleared the sand off their windshields by hand to maintain visibility.

“How about it... can we advance?”

Kamo leaned out to ask his driver.

“Yes... as long as we move slowly.”

“Mm. Good. We’ll move out after verifying everyone’s safety.

But as they advanced, they found that the sky ahead was gloomy and dark.

A black funnel cloud moved toward Arnus, like a coiling dragon, and their instincts told them that something strange was about to happen.

On top of Arnus Hill, the world twisted.

At first they thought the Gate had collapsed, but then the earth groaned,

followed by a sudden earthquake, and then a black sun appeared at the top of what should have been the dome. It was a swirling sphere of red and violet, and looked very ominous. The floor of the dome should have been flat, but for some reason it seemed to have sunk downwards, like a funnel. It looked just like a 2D model of a black hole, the depression growing deeper the closer one got to the center, and there was a hole in the center of it that led to parts unknown.

“What, what on earth’s going on!?”

Directly underneath the black sun, Major Wu and Jenkins stopped shooting as they experienced this abnormal phenomenon for themselves.

However, due to the sudden deformation of the floor, the two of them lost their balance and they could not even remain standing.

Their surviving men frantically scrabbled away to avoid the black hole at the bottom of the depression.

“This is bad...”

After her bonds were cut and her gag was removed, Lelei announced the occurrence of the anomaly with a blank look on her face.

“What, what happened?”

“If the Gate was destroyed, the two worlds should have separated. But something else is at work here, which is trying to join two, no, more worlds than that together.”

“Which, which means!?”

Itami approached Lelei hoping that she would be able to explain.

“In other words, many worlds opened Gates at once. Which means the other side...”

Kato-sensei explained on Lelei’s behalf. The fact that even Liu and Jenkins on the Ginza side of the Gate were in the Special Region’s dome was a clear sign of the abnormality of it all.

“What’s the reason for that?”

“And while you can see what you might call a black sun, can you also see that

six-pointed star? That's a magic circle...:"

Kato pointed to a massive six-pointed star floating in the air around the black sun like a fence.

"Who drew such a huge magic circle!?"

This was the first time the hitherto expressionless Lelei had spoken in such a frightened voice.

Hazama answered them.

"That might be... yes, that's not a magic circle!"

"Then what is it?"

"Those are the defensive fortifications around Arnus, sensei. I'm sure of it, given its unique structure.

"But why would something made on the ground be floating in the air? How about the dome?"

Itami, who was being supported by Tuka as they stood on the warped ground, pointed to the sky and said:

"That must be a mirror image. The real thing's on the ground. The black sun floating in the sky is a reflection of the dome and Arnus itself!"

"In any case, now that all the worlds are jumbled up, if we don't do something now, something bad will happen."

Itami recalled the other world he had glimpsed for a moment through a briefly-opened Gate. Some creature had laid countless eggs in the wilderness. He imagined what would happen if they all hatched, and the hatchlings were free to run around. But someone loudly denied Itami's warning. It was Jenkins.

"What's so bad about this? What's so bad about many worlds being joined together? Doesn't this mean mankind will have more worlds? We have to take from each other in an unsightly way because our world is too small. But if we could live freely over a multitude of worlds, we wouldn't need to envy, hinder and exploit each other! This is a blessing from god! We might have suffered in our cramped little world, but now we don't need to worry about that any longer. The ability to infinitely expand our borders will free us from the

problems of ideological and religious conflicts! After all, you just need to go to a place where the people you hate don't exist. We can just draw our boundaries and never emerge from them. This is a good thing! There's no need to do anything about it!"

However, Lelei voiced a rebuttal.

"That's not all! Every world has its own residents. Suddenly contacting them will cause disaster."

"If there are natives there, then we'll just have to eliminate them! We've got these, don't we?"

Jenkins held up his gun to show off its strength.

Perhaps Liu agreed with him, because he nodded as well.

"Just so. If we could expand our living space without limit, we wouldn't need to say, 'the west of the Pacific belongs to us and the east belongs to the Americans' and other petty divisions of land like that!"

As he shouted that, Liu approached the black abyss.

"Does this lead to another world? What kind of world is it?"

Liu seemed more curious than afraid, and so he poked his face out to take a look, gazing into the depths of the abyss. Itami had once had a terrifying experience due to his curiosity, so he shouted, "Wait, wait!" But nobody could stop him.

As Liu leaned out over the abyss, his body froze, spasmed, and then collapsed limply.

"Director!"

Major Wu and his men hurriedly ran over. In the moment they approached, countless tentacles seized them and dragged them into the abyss or simply impaled them. Wails and shouts and wild gunshots rang out.

Jenkins realised he had been wrong.

The worlds on the other side of the Gate were not necessarily hospitable to humanity and full of resources. The natives might not necessarily be weaker

than mankind. Just like how one might alarm a snake by striking the grass, humanity might end up drawing the attention of a dreadful foe.

As they looked on, countless things crawled out of the abyss.

“They’re coming they’re coming they’re coming out! It really is them!”

The creatures which emerged were just as Itami had described. They were too large to be called insects. These insectoids were about the size of a human being.

Itami had probably stimulated them to hatch, and then Liu had brought them to this world.

In order to fill their bellies, the bug-things attacked Liu and Jenkins’ men.

“This isn’t a joke! We’re fucked!”

Rory charged in with her halberd, sweeping out their legs from under them. She evaded their razor-tipped forelegs and chopped through their chitinous carapaces with her backswings.

Purple fluid sprayed all over, and Rory frowned at the stench.

“Ew! What is this!”

Perhaps she was repulsed by the bugs’ bodily fluids, but Rory leapt backwards in retreat. However, the moment she jumped up, she was intercepted by a diving winged bug. One of its mandibles pierced into Rory’s slender body.

“Rory!”

Tuka’s bowstring hummed as she loosed an arrow, which penetrated the winged bug’s body.

The winged bug which had mauled Rory collided with the wall of the dome.

Rory tried to stand up, gritting her teeth against the pain. But countless winged bugs gathered in the sky and then dove down at Rory.

Kuribayashi and Tomita hip-fired their PDWs to cover Rory.

“Guh... killing them one by one is nothing, but there’s too many of them!”

Itami was shocked as he saw Rory’s expression. Even a Demigod was

blanching at the thought of fighting these bugs. Itami used his shotgun to blow away a winged bug trying to attack Rory from behind, but he had to hold his nose because of the bug juices which had gotten onto him. Then he grabbed Rory's hand and helped her up.

"This is bad, General! This is super bad! We need to stop them from coming through!"

In manga and anime and movies, enemies like these were always bad news.

Whether the world was covered by a sea of corruption and became uninhabitable, or if mankind had been parasitized and used as food, or the sun and stars were eaten up... whatever the case, the world of the future would not have a place for mankind in it.

"Open fire!"

Perhaps he had been influenced by Itami's wariness, but Hazama immediately ordered an attack.

The surrounding troopers raised their weapons and fired on the bug horde, and soon their massive corpses fell to the ground.

However, the bugs kept pouring out like a geyser. In addition, the Type 64 rifles were no good against the larger bugs, and they could not stall their advance.

"Dammit, bring up the tank!"

The Type 74 tank's main gun spurted flame, and the shockwave blew the bug horde apart. But it was like hitting fleas with a hammer; terribly inefficient. Also, there was the fact that the tank shells were damaging the dome which kept the bugs from spilling into the Special Region, so they could not use it often.

"I've had it with them!"

Rory frowned, stomping on the medium-sized bugs that bullets could not stop and swung her halberd, hacking, smashing and crushing the bugs around her like she was dancing.

Tomita and Kuribayashi guarded Rory while Itami shot the flying bugs out of

the air with his shotgun.

Even so, the bugs retained an overwhelming advantage. Their sheer numbers were such that they could swallow up even Rory's destructive power and the JSDF's firepower.

Just then, Lelei jumped up.

She wrapped the bundle of hair around her fist, incanted a quiet verse, and then enlarged the portal to Itami's world.

After that, the depression below the dome regained its flatness and the black sun vanished, showing the ceiling. There was something which looked like a colorless puddle over the debris pile of the Gate.

The bugs which seemed to have taken over the interior of the dome for a moment lost their advantage in numbers.

Under a fusillade of gunfire, the number of bugs steadily dwindled, and the dome's floor was stacked high with corpses.

"Youji! I've widened the path to Ginza. If this keeps up, the Gate to the other world will be destroyed and the bugs won't be able to come through! Hurry up and take care of the magic circle while there's still time!"

"The only way to turn things around is to destroy that magic circle!"

"Leave this place to us and go!"

As he heard Lelei, Rory and Tuka speak, Itami turned to Hazama with a doubtful look on his face.

"Lieutenant Itami, I authorize you to take any measures necessary!"

"Eh... but..."

Itami did not know how to destroy the magic circle either.

"Kato-sensei, how can we destroy it?"

The old man went "hmmm~" as he delivered his postulation in response to Hazama's question.

"An effective magic circle must be carefully and precisely made. It will lose its power if just a corner or a small portion is damaged. If the magic circle is made

of fortress walls and trenches, then all you need to do is destroy the walls or fill up the trenches with sand.”

“I see... we’ll go with explosives, then.”

All eyes went to Itami once more. Now that you know what to do, hurry up — that was the pressure everyone’s eyes seemed to be exerting.

“Still, why me?”

“There’s nobody else but you, right?”

Setting the demolition charges would take a few hours. Given the look on Lelei’s face, she could not hold open the passage to Ginza for that long.

“Wait, doesn’t this mean I won’t be able to go back to Japan?”

“Most definitely.”

Hazama nodded.

“And you’re still sending me to do it?”

“Who else is more suitable?”

“But, this year’s Comiket...”

After saying that, Lelei, Rory and Tuka’s gazes grew very oppressive as they focused on Itami. Overwhelmed by their presence, he looked at Rory, Lelei and Tuka in turn.

Their individual intentions and something formed between the three of them seized Itami and bound him.

“It, it can’t be helped.”

Itami turned to Tomita and said, “come with me,” and then he broke into a run. Kuribayashi said, “Ah, I’ll go too,” but Itami replied, “You stay here” and stopped her in her tracks.

“But why!?”

“Do you have a reason to stay here?”

Itami tilted his head, a look of bafflement on his face.

“Ah, but because... that...”

Kuribayashi muttered as she glanced at Tomita.

However, Tomita said, “Kuribayashi. Go back to Japan.”

“Eh!?”

“I’m very grateful that you feel that way, but I’ve already decided be with Bozes. Sorry!”

Saying so, Tomita pushed Kuribayashi on the back.

“Uuu...”

Kuribayashi stumbled away, her eyes leaking tears. Perhaps she had been serious about him.

But Itami and Tomita turned their backs on Kuribayashi and ran off.

“What, don’t tell me Kuribayashi was really into you?”

“It must be the suspension bridge effect. As for you, seems you’ve finally given up, el-tee.”

“Well, the three of them were looking at me that way. What could I do once they went that far?”

Having just exited the dome, they saw Yao, who was commanding the mercenaries. Itami shouted, “I’ll leave everyone to you!”

“I shall complete my task even if it costs me my life!”

“Tuka especially. I have no idea what on earth she’s thinking, setting off all those death flags.”

After that, Tomita told him the truth.

“She felt that tripping a death flag in front of someone else who had a death flag would transfer misfortune to the person who last tripped the flag.”

“At first, she wanted you to trip the death flag. Don’t get me wrong, she didn’t mean anything by it. She just felt that you wouldn’t go to the battlefield if you were in hospital. However, things didn’t work out as she planned. Therefore, Tuka planned to take that misfortune onto herself.”

“That idiot...”

Itami clicked his tongue, a dumbfounded look on his face. He looked back to Tuka and the others and shouted:

“Oi, Tuka! After all this is over... we’ll have a date with tea and cakes!”

“...”

Itami’s sudden move made Tomita and Yao’s eyes go wide.

“This way, the death flag will go to me, right? Do I need to talk about how relaxed I feel?”

“I don’t know. Not sure how this trope works, and I can’t really comment... Still, is this really okay, el-tee?”

“Well, we’re just planting explosives. We’re not fighting anything, so it’ll be safer than over there. Same with the explosives, as long as you’re careful, you won’t die!”

After saying that, Itami added, “Don’t worry, it’ll be fine.”

Hazama looked back at his men and announced:

“Alright! This is a general retreat! Issue the White Rabbit order!”

“It’s White Rabbit! White Rabbit!”

The men echoed Hazama’s order down the line, and it spread rapidly. The troops standing by outside the dome lined up and passed through the Gate Lelei had made.

Behind them, Rory waved to Yao, indicating that she ought to have the townsfolk and the mercenaries organize a defense.

“While Youji takes care of the magic circle, you must stop those bugs from escaping!”

“What’s this?”

“It’s the document that Minister Kanou asked me to give you.”

Hazama thanked him, opened the brown envelope, and quickly paged

through its contents. It contained information about Japan's current situation and Prime Minister Morita's words. And then, there were the orders from the Defense Minister.

"What?"

As he saw Hazama's face, the staff officers gathered around in curiosity over the document's contents.

"What's the matter?"

"It's an order from the Minister of Defense. Good, this means communications with the government have been re-established. We have also verified the safety of Lelei-san. I'm altering part of the retreat order! Everyone who wishes to stay can stay!"

"Still, is such a document really binding?"

Hazama did not let his staff officers say anything else.

"No. But since communications with Ichigaya have been severed, this is the only directive from the government. All we can do is obey."

"In that case, can't we sneak through the Gate and ask for clarification over the wireless?"

"The Gate is now one-way."

"...Ah, alright."

"All we can do is carry out this order. You understand, right?"

"..."

The staff officers smiled as they drank in Hazama's meaningful words.

"General! What should we do about the bugs?"

"True, we can't let the people staying behind be attacked by the bugs."

"Let them form a defensive perimeter inside and outside the dome, then."

"Alright, defensive line to keep the bugs from breaking through! Everyone who's not staying, return to Ginza! Hurry!"

Chapter 10

The JGSDF Special Region Expeditionary Force began to pull out.

By the time half the troops which remained in Arnus had departed, units dispatched to various other areas finally returned.

“The 2nd Combat Group’s returned.”

“Mm. Send them on to Ginza. Leave as many vehicles and as much weapons and ammunition behind except for what we need to transport the wounded and critical resources.

“Yes.”

As the personnel went through the Gate to Ginza one after the other, Hazama and the others gathered up the men who wanted to stay as well as the Arnus townsfolk and had them pile up the dirt inside and outside the dome to help set up wire obstacles. They were preparing to deal with the bugs that would rush out of the Gate when Lelei ran out of strength.

“Everyone from this unit who wants to stay, assemble over here!”

“All returnees, leave your ammo and other stores behind!”

“Prioritize the movement of the wounded! Hurry!”

The members of the various recon teams showed up among the people who were going back.

Sergeant Major Kuwabara ordered Tozu and Azuma to carry Higaki’s stretcher, and as he supervised the construction of the fortifications, he found a plain-clothed Kuribayashi among the workers.

“Oi, Kuribayashi, what are you doing!? You want to stay?”

“I’m bad at giving up.”

“Won’t that be troublesome for you?”

“It’s fine, besides, there’s nothing interesting waiting for me at home. I want to go wild over here.”

“So the JSDF’s the best place for you, then? Don’t get hurt, you hear.”

“You too, boss.”

Higaki hummed a tune from where he lay on his stretcher. It must have been the morphine at work. Nishina, Katsumoto, Sasagawa... the members of 3rd Recon left Kuribayashi behind and vanished beyond the other side of the Gate.

Kuribayashi, who had stayed behind, gathered several lower-ranking people as temporary subordinates, and together they worked on setting up the barbed wire. Hazama called out from behind her.

“Can we get three rolls of concertina wire here?”

The person addressing her was Hazama, the commander of the Special Region Expeditionary Force. Kuribayashi saluted and replied: “Roger. Triple concertina it is... although, will it really work against those bugs?”

“Just install it first. We might not be able to stop the bugs’ assault if we rely solely on the dome’s walls. The dome is our last line of defense. Surely you don’t want to regret it later, no?”

“Roger.”

“Also, if you want to stay, you’d best gear up. Do you plan to fight like this?”

After Kuribayashi ran off to change, the officers under Hazama came up to him, their hands full of items to be brought back, and asked: “General... aren’t you going back?”

“As a commander, I have a duty to complete my task. When we advance I must be the first in, and when we retreat I must be the last out. That is how I feel that a commander ought to act.”

“But, how about your family?”

“My son’s old enough to take care of himself. There’s no need to worry about my wife. More to the point, you’ll have to sort things out after you get back. I’ll leave that to you.”

“Sir! In that case, please excuse us.”

Saying so, the officers saluted Hazama and then vanished through the Gate.

At the same time, Yanagida and Furuta were on a helicopter headed for Arnus.

After sighting Arnus Hill, the pilot adjusted his course and flew straight for it.

A shout of “anyone who wants to stay can stay” rang out over the aircraft radio. It would seem they wanted to gather all the airmen who wanted to remain.

After hearing this, a surprising number of people broke out in cheers.

“Well, a lot of people seem happy.”

“Being allowed to fly around freely here is very attractive, and it feels good to not have weird restrictions on you. But I have family on the other side...”

“Then why not bring your family over?”

“That was the original plan. But dammit, it was so sudden...”

“Lieutenant Yanagida, I wish to stay in the Special Region. Please let me off at Arnus.”

Still immobilized by everyone, Furuta expressed his desire to remain. However, Sherry — who had been silent all this while — addressed Furuta like she was chiding a petulant child.

“Is that what Tyuule-sama would want you to do, Furuta-sama? I’m sure that’s not it.”

“What would a kid know?”

“Well, I’m a woman too,” Sherry continued. “Therefore, please go back to Japan and fulfil your dream, Furuta-sama.”

“No.”

After that, Delilah interrupted in an annoyed tone of voice.

“I should have just killed her on the spot. That way Master Furuta wouldn’t have had any lingering attachments to this place.”

“In any case, I want to stay.”

“You can’t. You still have a duty to fulfil your dream, Furuta-sama.”

“A duty!?”

“Tyuule-sama believed you could fulfil your dream. That was why she looked so happy.”

“What part of Tyuule looked happy? How was she happy!?”

In Furuta’s eyes, Tyuule’s face had been a jumble of emotions.

But Sherry nodded without any hesitation.

“Mm, she had a very happy look on her face. I’m sure she felt happy because she felt you could fulfil your dreams, Furuta-sama.”

“Why is that!? How is there any happiness for Tyuule-san in that!?”

“I’m not quite sure how to explain it to you.”

“...I don’t get it. That’s not normal at all.”

And so, Delilah said, “Maybe, just maybe, I can sort of understand how that woman feels.”

Delilah looked outside as she continued speaking.

“If someone’s been in despair for a long time, then even the thought of “maybe I could be happy” might be enough for them. The fact is that you thought of her, Master Furuta, and you told her, ‘come with me’. And you can do it if it’s you, can’t you, Master Furuta? Therefore, she felt that she could be happy.”

“In that case, why didn’t she reach out and take it!? It’s the same as looking at food and saying, ‘oh, it’s delicious, but I’m full’, isn’t it?”

“Do you understand what it means to be afraid of happiness? Imagine there’s a door, and that going through it would make you happy, but once you think that you might not actually be happy, you start to have doubts. Maybe there’ll be nothing behind that door after you open it. On the contrary, you might be filled with despair instead. Therefore, maybe it’s better not to open the door, but to press your ear to it, listen to the sounds from the other side, and maybe you’ll be happier that way.”

“Can you even do that?”

Furuta did not want to accept Delilah’s words, because they were just too sad. However, his heart understood what she was trying to say.

Furuta fell silent, and Yanagida said to the pilot, “Alright, we don’t have time to land, just fly straight through the Gate.”

The aircraft radio said, “There’s no time, hurry!” If they chose to land and then walk off the helicopter, they would not be able to return.

“Roger!”

The pilot nimbly worked the control stick and the collective, then flew into the opening of the dome.

“Watch out! We’re going in!”

The people inside the dome and around the Gate saw a helicopter that was practically scraping the ground flying in at high speed, and they hurriedly dove aside. Others did not dodge, but instead dropped flat to the ground. Yanagida and the others nearly grazed their backs as their helicopter plunged into the Gate.

After entering the Gate and passing through a murky world of whiteness, the scenery of Ginza unfolded before them.

“It’s Ginza!”

After passing through the Gate, the helicopter nearly hit the personnel coming back from the Special Region, and so he pulled up on his stick and raised the helicopter’s nose. However, he nearly struck the dome’s ceiling, so he pushed down on his stick and forced a descent.

After this rollercoaster ride, the helicopter exited the dome and scraped against the ground outside the Ginza garrison.

The helicopter’s fuselage gouged a furrow into the asphalt road and its blades of its rotor bent and broke after they struck the ground. It slid amidst a trail of sparks into an alley between two department store buildings.

If the Ginza Garrison had not been besieged by protesters, if the surrounding traffic had not been diverted away, there would probably have been an accident. But currently, all the cars in the area were gone, and so only the riot police saw as the helicopter expended its momentum in a slide across the tarmac.

It ground to a halt in front of a store window displaying wedding dresses.

“Hey, everyone alright?”

The smell of iron and aviation fuel filled the air. Amidst all this, the riot police rushed over.

They were closely followed by men from the fire department, which doused the helicopter in water to prevent it from burning. Yanagida was face down on the ground and hosed from head to toe, and he raised his head with a “Pwha!”

“I thought I was going to die...”

“Ah, yes... I saw Father and Mother told me it was too early to join them...”

Sherry's petite frame was stuck between Yanagida and Delilah, and she was flat on her back.

“Is everyone alive?”

“Yup~”

“I guess this counts as living.”

“I am fine.”

All the men responded in turn. The pilot silently raised his right arm.

Yanagida and the others had successfully returned to Ginza.

“Guh...”

The sweat on Lelei's forehead was like a waterfall as her body listed to one side.

Keeping the Gate open for several hours had almost depleted Lelei's strength. In particular, suddenly enlarging the Gate for Yanagida and the others had

taken a severe toll on her stamina. After that, the Gate had shrunk to a size where their personnel could only pass through single file and with their heads ducked.

“Lelei, are you alright?”

Lelei nodded weakly in response to Tuka’s question.

Since she was clenching her teeth and focusing her strength, she did not have the energy to speak.

“How much longer can she keep this up?”

Kato answered General Hazama on her behalf.

“About another ten minutes or so.”

“Can’t you take over for her, Kato-sensei?”

“I couldn’t do it!”

Hazama regarded the line of JSDF personnel. The remaining men would not be able to fully pass through the Gate in the next ten minutes.

Hazama waved his hand to hurry them up.

“Everyone who doesn’t need to go back, fall out now!”

“I have a pregnant wife!”

“Alright, you go first.”

“I’m single, I’ll go back later!”

Those people who had pressing reasons to go back were clapped on the back and forced through by the others.

By this time, the Gate had narrowed to the size of a pipe. The servicemen who wanted to go back had to crawl through it.

“Hurry! Hurry!”

They would not be able to go through while carrying things.

Many of the men dropped what they were holding and stuck their arms out while pushing their heads through to let the people on the other side pull them over.

“Lelei-san! Do your best!”

“Come on, it’s just a bit more, so hang in there!”

Lelei responded to everyone’s cheers by sweeping back her sweat-slicked hair and nodding.

“You lot, hurry up!”

But the Gate was gradually shrinking.

“Oh no!”

And then, Lelei finally passed out.

The last man to go through had the toes of his combat boot cut off by the closing hole, and the severed tip rolled around on the ground.

“Ah, dammit!”

After that, there was a small earthquake. However, the soldiers punching the ground in resentment did not feel it.

Isn’t there a way— everyone looked over to Lelei, but when they saw her in Kato’s arms, nobody could say anything. That was because everyone present understood that her efforts had gone beyond her limits.

The men looked nervously to the piece of combat boot that stood where the Gate had been, and they all breathed a sigh of relief to see that there were no toes in it. Its owner must have been hugging his toes on the other side in relief and going, “That was close!”

Finally, the black sun appeared on top of the dome again. The world began to warp once more, and the flat surface began to sink down.

“Alright, the bugs are coming. Everyone to your positions. Close the doors to the dome.”

Under Hazama’s orders, there was a weighty clang as the steel doors slammed shut, and the servicemen each took their assigned places.

Since many of the people with families had chosen to go back, most of the people who remained were young. The people who had remained here with Hazama were largely single junior officers.

“So, how many people stayed?”

“I estimate around four to five thousand.”

“So a total of four to five thousand people who have something good here and who couldn’t get back, huh? Alright, everyone who stayed, reorganize into new units. It’s okay if it’s a bit messy. Get them outside the dome and prepare for the walls to be breached.”

“What about the Arnus mercenaries?”

“We can count on them in a melee. Have them join the defense.”

“Roger.”

The troopers each readied their rifles and pointed the muzzles of their machine guns towards the black hole at the heart of the depression.

Rory levelled her halberd at it, her toes grinding through a bug’s corpse as it slid across the ground and her heel firmly planted on the floor. An air of power radiated from her, like a fully-drawn bow.

Beside her was Kuribayashi, her bayonet-equipped Type 64 rifle in hand. She was in full battle order and was fully loaded, complete with a spare rifle on her back.

“So we’re fighting together again.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

The two women exchanged looks and then smiled to each other.

The mercenaries formed a shield wall around the dome doors. The JSDF troopers pointed their rifles out through the gaps in preparation for the enemy to arrive.

As Hazama checked on his men’s status, he took up a wireless handset and spoke into it.

“This is Hazama. Itami, can you hear me? How’s things on your end?”

“Actually, things are not going too well here.”

“What happened? Do you need assistance? Have you planted the explosives?”

“They’re all set up. Just need to hook up the detonator...”

“Think of a way to deal with it within ten minutes...”

Saying so, Hazama put away his handset. An elephant-sized bug was about to emerge from the abyss.

“Requesting reinforcements. This is Itami. Situation critical, I need backup.”

However the wireless went silent before the crucial request could go through, and there was no response.

“Did something happen?”

“I guess.”

“Deal with it within ten minutes... easier said than done.”

“Of course he’d think that way since you didn’t explain the situation over here to him.”

Itami grumbled and Tomita tried to soothe him from where he was dangling on a rope halfway down the wall to plant explosives.

“So, are we going to find a way around this? After all, if we’ve got no more tricks up our sleeves, we’ll have to give up.”

Tomita was being lowered himself to the center of the wall to organize the fuses that were connected everywhere. He could not let go of them. If he did, the fuses would be a mess, and sorting them out again would waste valuable time. If he wanted to finish this job, all he could do was wait for Itami to lower the cable for the main detonator to him.

“Well, it’s not like we have a choice, do we? Wait here, Tomita.”

However, a Dar appeared in front of Itami. It was probably a survivor from the group that had caused havoc in town. The Dar bared its fangs and glared at Itami, looking like it was going to lunge at any moment.

“In any case, I need to think of a way to deal with this guy.”

The detonator and its cables were all behind the Dar.

The problem now was Itami's weapons — his shotgun was loaded with 12 gauge birdshot (each pellet was 2.75mm across), and he could only load two rounds at a time. He felt uneasy about taking on a monster like the Dar with that.

"If only I had some slug shells..."

"How would a normal person have something like that?"

"Good grief. If I'd known, I wouldn't have taken that death flag back."

Itami loaded his shells into the shotgun, then closed the weapon that was folded open in the middle.

Rory and Kuribayashi faced a large bug that looked like a spider.

The bug was incredibly dextrous in a way that did not match its massive body at all, and it stabbed repeatedly with the sharpened tips of its tentacles and limbs. It was bigger than them and it rained a series of stabs at them from above was like a killing storm. Rory's nimble footwork carried her past the strikes, which barely grazed her.

However, its bladed limbs, which slammed down with tremendous force, could cause incredible damage with just a slight graze.

Her goth lolita's priestess uniform was ripped, baring great swathes of her skin, and even the demigoddess clicked her tongue in annoyance.

"Nobody asked you lot to come to this world!"

Rory's sweat beaded on her skin like pearls, and they scattered as she jumped.

As she fell, she raised her halberd and swung it down to add her momentum to the strike.

It plunged down toward the giant bug's head, which leapt back a considerable distance to evade.

Having missed its mark, the halberd crashed against the concrete floor, and the explosive impact threw up a cloud of dust which briefly obscured her vision.

However, Rory easily pulled the half-buried halberd from the ground, then stepped forward with a cry of “over here” and stabbed its body with the spike on its tip.

Her blow struck true. It felt like she had made contact with a heavy slab of metal.

The bug’s exoskeleton was a thick plate of carapace, and while she could not pierce it, she sent it flying and knocked it to the ground. Rory immediately pressed the attack and delivered a blistering combination of strikes.

“Take this take this take this and die!”

It was very difficult to block each and every strike in the savage storm of blows she unleashed. The bug’s massive body quivered, as though it was afraid of her overwhelming destructive power, and its survival instincts sent it scurrying back to its companions.

Kuribayashi kept pulling the trigger, wiping out the smaller bugs in front of Rory. Now that her way was cleared, Rory charged.

“Tremble before me! Cower in fear!”

Rory stomped through the bug horde and suddenly turned, using the force of her rotation to reap a swathe through the bugs. She sent the bugs flying like she was shaking them off her weapon. The massive body of the spider bug was slowly exposed.

“Now! Open fire!”

Under Hazama’s order, flashing tracers lashed out in a rain of bullets as they covered Rory.

“Fire! Fire!”

The heavy machine gun and the tank cannon punched the immobilized bug’s carapace full of holes.

Rory and Kuribayashi backed off to avoid the explosion.

A mantis-type bug spread its wings to pursue them. Kuribayashi showered it in bullets, but the wounds it received were not fatal, and it immediately prepared to attack upon touching down.

Just as the mantis bug was about to bite her, Rory ducked aside, and once she recovered she immediately prepared to intercept an attack.

“Hmph, so you’re smart enough for teamwork. I can’t look down on you, even though you’re a bug.”

Rory turned at the waist and swung her halberd. The mantis bug leapt at her, and Rory waited for the right timing before hacking at it with her halberd.

However, the mantis bug suddenly flared its wings and stopped its advance. Having missed her timing, Rory lost her balance and cleaved nothing but air. Her black goth lolita priestess’ outfit blossomed like a flower with the force of her revolution, and Rory stepped boldly across the ground like she was dancing.

Carried by the weight of the halberd, she spun again, and then she took another step forward and accelerated her spin. From her steady, even steps, one could tell her toes were stably supporting her center of gravity, doubling the force of her spin, and this doubled destructive force clashed with the mantis bug’s scythe arms.

“Still, far too naive!”

There was a sound like metal striking metal, and the impact shattered the scythe-bladed claw which the mantis bug had extended for defense.

A solid hit. Hazama and the others believed Rory would win.

However, a rain of bullet-like interlopers fell from the sky and grazed Rory’s body.

She narrowly managed to avoid them, but the blow had done some damage to Rory.

“My left arm? Hmph, so be it.”

Rory paid her dangling left arm no heed. She might be a demigoddess, but recovering still took some time. She would not be able to fight if she waited for herself to heal. Thus, Rory abandoned the idea that she had ever had a left arm and her mind switched over to only using her right arm to fight.

“Alright! Come and... huh?”

The newly-arrived adversaries had the form of the crawling bane of

housewives everywhere.

“Aiiiiieeeee!”

Both Rory and Kuribayashi blanched as they saw them. Their flesh was covered in goosebumps, and they suddenly broke out in a sweat.

“No, noooooooooooooo!”

Rory and Kuribayashi wailed as they hugged each other. They simply could not overcome their biological reaction.

The kitchenbane bugs rushed at the two of them.

Just then, a flaming arrow flew out from nowhere and struck one of the bugs in the eye.

The oily bug was promptly consumed by flame

“Rory, Shino, leave this place to me, now get back!”

After nocking another arrow, the elf maiden Tuka drew the fiberglass compound bow (with mechanical pulley assistance) to full extension. As the most skilled of the three girls with housework, she did not hesitate in exterminating these pests and promptly pressed the attack.”

“Acute-hno unjhy Oslash-dh jopo-auml yuml-uya whqolgn!Oh fire, cleanse and purify these vermin!”

Arrows loosed from a pulley-system bow could reach speeds in excess of 270 km/h, After being further boosted by the power of the sylphs, they pierced the verminous bugs like thunderbolts.

To Tuka, this was a recreation of the nigh-divine skill that her father favored. In addition, the power of the flame spirits wreathed her opponents in flame.

The bugs’ cries echoed throughout Arnus.

The bug horde converged on Tuka, possibly considering her a new threat.

However, Tuka pulled away from them with athletic moves.

The smaller bugs crawled all over the ground.

“Defensive stance!”

After that, on Yao's command, the mercenaries formed their unevenly-shaped shields into a wall on both sides of her, in order to block off the bug horde.

They stabbed the incoming bugs with their swords while the JGSDF members spat fire from their rifles through the gaps, mowing down the bug hordes.

During this time, Tuka finished incanting a spell and released a bolt of bluish-white lightning. The smaller bugs were immediately roasted to a crisp. While it did not harm the larger bugs, the JSDF troopers were now free to focus their fire on the surviving large bugs.

After seeing how Tuka had bravely fought, Rory could not continue to be afraid.

As the cockroach bugs appeared before her, Rory raised her halberd and shouted, "Ahhhh, I'll have Itami bathe me after this!" and hacked at the bugs.

A sickening sensation ran up her arm and Rory wrinkled her pretty eyebrows and shut her eyes. Perhaps she had anticipated this, but when she gingerly opened her eyes, she found that the bug's fluids had painted her halberd a gruesome new shade.

The pellets from the shotgun's muzzle raked the Dar.

Several small sphere's sank into the creature's flesh. However, the monster was covered from head to toe in thick fur, and it showed no sign that it had been hurt. After backing off from Itami, it raised its claws and bared its fangs in a threatening display.

"I didn't expect to step into a post-apocalyptic movie here of all places..."

Itami took out a pair of shells and fed them into the shotgun. However, after seeing the small pellets in the plastic cartridges, Itami sighed.

"The hell am I going to do with birdshot!?"

Cut-down shotguns like these were often used by radical terrorists.

They were both easy to hide and did not require precise aim. They did great damage and performed well in close combat.

But in turn, they had a very short range, and they lacked punch. It was enough for humans, but their firepower was insufficient to take down monsters.

The Dar roared and leapt at Itami.

“Uwah!”

As Itami ducked the monster’s claws, he pointed his weapon at the monster and pulled the trigger.

There were two gunshots.

The Dar’s hide ripped open, and blood sprayed all over the surroundings.

However, the monster looked like it had merely been tickled.

The battle inside the dome grew steadily more intense.

The bugs pouring out increased in quantity and variety, and the winged bugs in particular seemed to be pouring out like a river.

The wire obstacles they had spent so much effort setting up appeared to be completely useless against the shelled bugs. The JSDF servicemen could no longer aim at individual bugs with their firearms, and could only shoot wildly in the general direction of the bugs. Even so, their bullets were not wasted, because many winged bugs were shot out of the sky and the smaller bugs were pulverized. There were so many bugs crawling around in front of them that they did not need to aim to score a hit.

The mercenaries held their shields in a wall against the shelled bugs that poured down like bullets. However, the bugs’ spear-like sharpened feet pierced the mercenaries’ shields and hit them, gouging chunks out of their chests.

“Guwaaargh!”

The floor of the dome gradually filled with countless corpses of giant bugs. But the bugs crunched over the corpses as they attacked, and the mercenaries fell one after the other.

The JSDF casualties outnumbered the mercenaries.

“Uwah, uwaaaaahhh!”

“Someone, get it off me!”

A trooper ran around, covered by countless bugs which then stabbed him, dropping him to the ground as he foamed from the mouth. This was no longer the sound of the troopers encircling the black hole and keeping its contents from spilling out, but the troopers being surrounded by bugs within the dome.

Shelled bugs flew over like bullets, and Tuka neatly shot them out of the air.

However, after bringing down the last one, she was out of arrows.

“Oh, oh no...” As she mumbled to herself while feeling around for an arrow, a winged bug pressed close, intent on impaling Tuka’s body.

“Look out!”

Yao pushed Tuka down to protect her. However, the bug stabbed Yao square in the chest.

“Yao!”

Tuka embraced Yao, who had fallen face down.

“It’s just a flesh wound! Hang in there!”

But Yao did not respond to Tuka’s cries.

The mercenaries took a square formation to defend themselves from all directions. The JSDF troopers retreated inside the squares, and continued firing on the bugs that assaulted them. However, as the troopers and the mercenaries on the outside went down one after the other, the square began slowly shrinking.

Elsewhere, the bugs which filled the dome finally reached the outer wall.

They attacked the concrete wall with their sharp legs, chewing away at it like drills. They were breaking apart the dome to open a path to the Special Region.

After making a small hole, the bugs poured out into the air of the Special Region.

“Flamethrowers up! Sweep them!”

The NBC troopers waiting outside sprayed tongues of flame at the hirde, burning away the bugs swarming out of the hole. But the bugs' insectile instincts made them fly towards fire, and they mauled the troopers even while wreathed in flame.

"Uwah, someone, help...!"

A trooper wearing a flamethrower was grabbed by a burning bug and burned by his own flames.

Under the mercenaries' testudo formation, Hazama took out his wireless handset and shouted into it.

"Itami, hurry! We can't hold out much longer!"

The monster's telephone-pole-sized arm swung at him.

Every time the razor-sharp claws sliced through the air, Itami evaded them by falling flat on his ass.

I can't kill this monster by keeping my distance and using this shotgun on it. After coming to that conclusion, the only thing Itami could think of was luring it as close as possible. However, Itami only knew enough close combat skills to fake his way through. While he was by no means an amateur combatant, there was no way he could fight a monster to a standstill.

"Cut it up and break its bones! ...As if I could do that! Uwah!"

Itami's plan was to observe his foe and then rend its flesh. But he was just a little off in misjudging the distance, and the Dar's claw was suddenly in his face.

He raised his arm to defend himself, but the shocking impact sent him flying through the air and sprawling to the ground. The shotgun shell he had gone to so much trouble to discharge at point blank range merely dented the monster's skin.

"Koff, koff! My ar'sm still attached!?"

It hurt so much that he thought his arm had been shredded. Yet strangely enough, Itami had not been harmed.

“Dammit!”

He wanted to stand up, but his body creaked all over. Still, it was not unbearable.

It hurt badly enough to make him clench his teeth, but Itami wanted to see what had happened to his body.

After that, fresh blood spurted from his arms, like they had been raked by the claws. He wondered what it was, and it turned out to be writing. The scratches took the form of words which appeared on his skin.

“The blood flowing within your body is mine. Therefore, your wounds are also mine.”

“Eh, Rory? Seriously...”

Itami thought back to when Rory had grabbed the same part of herself where blood had been taken from him.

“Try your best not to get hurt. A terrible fate awaits those who scar a maiden’s flesh.”

Itami knew why Rory had done this.

“Now I can’t even die or get hurt! I can’t believe that woman’s taking herself hostage like this!”

“Also: I can only take your wounds. If your head comes off, you’ll die.”

In other words, she was warning him, “don’t get hurt and don’t die.”

After loaded his next round into the shotgun, Itami face the monster. Its eyes seemed to be saying, “you’re a troublesome bastard.”

“Closer. Just a little closer.”

All he could do now was press his shotgun directly against the monster and pull the trigger.

Itami obliqued his body slightly, still staring the Dar in the eye, and waited for it to swing with all its might.

But the Dar moved with speed that could not be seen by the naked eye and ripped open Itami’s chest.

“Crap! Sorry, Rory!”

Itami pressed his chest and moved his legs.

Thinking that Itami was beaten and could not fight any more, the Dar gaped its maw open wide, prepared to crush Itami’s skull between its teeth.

“I was waiting for you to do that!”

Itami jammed the muzzle of his shotgun into the depths of the monster’s throat, and opened fire at point blank range.

The two loads of 12 gauge No. 6 buckshot tore through the Dar’s throat, pulverized its cervical vertebrae and penetrated all the way to its breathing center — the medulla oblongata.

The monster stiffened up, and Itami kicked it with a great cry, sending it toward a fissure on the ground.



On its way down, the Dar swiped at Tomita, who was still clinging to his rope.

Tomita, who had very nearly followed it, shouted:

“El-tee! Are you trying to kill me!?”

Ah, sorry! Are you alright!?”

That was close. Next time, tell me if you’re going to drop something on top of my head.”

Itami shakily approached the roll of detonation cord and lowered it to Tomita.

After taking hold of the cord, he spliced it together with the fuses.

Countless bugs passed through the holes that led from the inside of the dome to the outside world, and then they spread out.

The troopers waiting outside used flamethrowers to keep the bugs from flowing out, but as more of the bug holes appeared, the men were gradually overwhelmed. As she saw more and more bugs escaping outside, Rory shouted: “This is bad!”

Rory ran towards the wall, intent on keeping the bug hordes from spilling out. But Rory’s chest immediately gouted fresh blood, and she coughed up blood from her mouth. It was as though an invisible opponent had stabbed her in the chest. It forced even a demigoddess to her knees.

“Guh!” Someone stop them!”

But nobody answered Rory’s cry.

Everyone had their hands full just protecting themselves.

The bugs escaped the dome in incredible numbers. Countless winged bugs, shelled bugs and crawling bugs made their way outside.

However, it was immediately followed by a fearsome roar that drowned out all other noise.

The helicopters of the 4th Combat Group appeared, and they bathed the bugs emerging the dome in a rain of bullets.

“Kill every single one of them!”

Following Kengun’s orders, the UH-1Js harried the escaping shelled and winged bugs all over the place. Their wings and shells filled with holes and they went down immediately.

On top of that, the skies over Arnus filled with Wyverns.

“I have no grudge against you, but since you’re a danger to the world, I shall wipe you all out. Everyone, get them!”

After Giselle’s exhortation, the Wyverns plunged down.

Then, the Wyverns descended in unison upon the bugs leaving the dome, chewing and devouring them. The bugs’ numbers diminished.

“Don’t let a single one escape!”

As others took care of the bugs outside, Giselle ordered her Wyverns to work their way into the dome through the holes.

Giselle’s minions — the Wyverns — made it inside and laid into the bug horde.

As the tide turned, a look of relief came over Rory’s face, and she panted heavily while using her halberd to prop herself up.

Giselle walked over to Rory.

“Onee-sama. I trust my debt is cleared now?”

“Mm, that works for me.”

After hearing the answer she craved, Giselle clapped and exclaimed, “Yaaaay!” After that, she addressed Rory again.

“Also, ah, er... I’d like it if you could help cover things up a little. That way Mistress won’t scold me for helping you, Onee-sama.”

“Got it. I’ll take care of it. You’ll be able to return to Belnago with your head held high.”

Upon hearing this, Giselle clapped in delight once more.

“Wonderful! In that case, how about marrying Mistress!”

“No can do.”

“Cheh. How about free food and drink?”

“This is a demigod’s duty, right? Don’t get too greedy just because you did what was expected of you! I won’t ask about why you gathered so many Wyverns, so check yourself.”

“Eh, I guess I was asking for that. Got it. I’ll help take care of the rest around here!”

In order to avoid Rory’s doubtful gaze, Giselle assaulted the bug hordes once more.

Elsewhere, Hazama was helping up his fallen men, and he barked into his handset, “Say again?”

“What? Ten seconds!? Understood!”

He put down his wireless handset and shouted to his subordinates.

“Detonation in ten seconds! Prepare for the black hole to vanish!”

After receiving Hazama’s warning, the troopers did their best to stay away from the black hole. That said, the battle against the bugs still continued. Due to the intervention of the Wyverns, the battle became a deadlock, but it was not over yet.

Tuka did her best to drag Yao as far away from the black hole as she could.

“I, I’ll get a doctor for you right away. Come on, Yao!”

And then, a stream of 500 yen coins poured out of the skirt of Yao’s armor.

“These are... 500 yen coins?”

Her question was answered immediately.

“50 yen coins are better than 5 yen coins, so 500 yen coins ought to be better than 50 yen coins. And having more is better than having one, so I had the blacksmith fuse a few dozen of them together into a big medallion. That saved me.”

Yao looked up to Tuka.

“Don’t worry me. I thought you were dead!”

Tuka sat down hard on the ground, and punched Yao’s plump bosom. After that, Yao went “Guwaaaargh” and passed out from the commotio cordis.

“Hey, hey, hang on! Your wounds aren’t deep!”

Upon hearing Tuka’s voice, the JSDF medics rushed over.

“Her heart... oh no! Alright, get the paddles!”

They began cardiac massage to save Yao.

“What happened, Tuka?”

“Don’t ask questions with obvious answers! Obviously it was those bug bastards!”

“Ah, er, well...”

Tuka could not give a proper reply.

“Counting down from five!”

Itami retreated to a safe distance, then looked at his watch with Tomita and gripped the detonator tightly.

Tomita teased Itami.

“Hey, el-tee, how’s your chest?”

“Er, you mean this?”

Itami tugged at the shreds of his uniform blouse.

“I’ve been cursed.”

“Cursed? Don’t tell me you’ve confused it with a goddess’ blessing?”

“Five.”

“At this point, it’s a curse. It no longer has anything to do with my free will. And because of them, the I’ll miss the Summer Comiket and the Winter Comiket... dammit! But I won’t give up. I will go back! I’ll go back to Akiba and

the Comikets!”

“Four.”

“But when I think about things that way, shouldn’t I be feeling happy at this point?”

“Three.”

“Really? Is it like that?”

“Two.”

“That’s how it is. You’ll be punished if you talk too much.”

“Really?”

“One.”

“But it’s not like you totally refused them, right?”

“Well, I guess. It’s true...”

On the count of “zero”, Itami turned the knob on the detonator.

What would happen if one tied two rubber bands together, stretched them to their maximum extension, and then cut them?

The disappearance of the Gate was like the severance of the bands. In addition, the distortion accumulated from the creation of the Gate until the moment of its closure was discharged into the separated worlds all at once.

However, the earthquake this time was very special.

Regular earthquakes decreased in intensity the further one got from their epicenter. However, this global-scale earthquake’s intensity did not decrease at all, and the entire world shook as one.”

It was a 5(upper) on the JMA Seismic Intensity Scale. Its magnitude was incalculable.

The power of an earthquake was measured by the degree of damage it caused, but in this case it was not applicable.

This was particularly true in places where earthquakes occurred rarely, and

whose buildings were not built for sturdiness.

The Japanese might have said, “whoa, that startled me” about the earthquake, but in other places it destroyed many buildings and caused destruction on a massive scale.

Italica, House Formal Manor

The two earthquakes had thoroughly crushed the fighting spirit of the combatants.

The earth had suddenly lurched up and around in all directions, and the soldiers were assailed by a fear not born of bloody battle.

In battle, one feared the enemy. By slaying the enemy and defeating them, one could conquer one’s fear.

However, humans could not do anything about natural disasters such as earthquakes. Thus, they could not conquer their fear with courage. Therefore, the soldiers could not focus on fighting.

Their surging lust for battle and willpower were extinguished as though by water, leaving nothing but emptiness in their hearts.

Once their spirits cooled down, it was very hard to fire them up again. The soldiers recalled the fatigue and pain they had forgotten during their frenzied fighting. And so the soldiers abandoned the thought of fighting, helped their wounded stand or supported them, then began returning to their own lines.

Pina’s knights streamed back to her side.

“Your Highness!”

“Oh, Bozes. Thanks for your hard work.”

The first thing Beefeater said when she returned was to go “Ahhhh, I’m so tired! Water, fetch me water,” before falling on her back in front of Pina.

“For, for you, Beefeater-sama.”

The command staff girls ran over, holding a tumbler of water. The girls’ faces

were pale and their lips were trembling, probably because of the earthquake.

“Are you scared?”

“Yes, very scared, Beefeater-sama!”

Beefeater comforted the girl helping her up and patted her head as she surveyed her surroundings.

The knights, soldiers and demihuman warriors had returned. However, not a single one of them was unhurt, and they were like a scattered mob that could not even form up into a unit or take a formation.

“You think we’ve had it?”

“Certainly not!”

However, Pina’s strident voice slashed through Beefeater’s morose pronouncement.

Pina straddled her horse, her sword in her right hand and her left gallantly waving her flag, and everyone’s eyes went to her.

Even after the intense earthquake, Pina was still brimming with confidence, and as the men saw her, they too became brave.

“Your Highness!”

“Everyone, do not panic! A mere tremble like this is nothing for you to be afraid of!”

Of course, she was doing her level best to bear with her fear.

One could say the battle conditions were supremely unfavorable with the occurrence of this sudden earthquake. Pina had broken out in a cold sweat, her feet trembled uncontrollably, and her teeth were chattering since she could not close them completely.

If she could, she would very much like to flee immediately and stick her head under her bed. That was how frightened Pina was.

But Pina had learned. She had gained experience.

During the earthquake in the Imperial Capital. Itami had not shown the slightest bit of fear, and he had even laughed at it. Pina marvelled at how

reassuring and heartening that sight had been.

“That’s the attitude a general ought to have in a situation like this.”

If the general showed no fear, her men could rest at ease too.

She ought to pass the reassurance he had given her then on to her own men. Thus, Pina grit her teeth and forced herself to bend her fear-stiffened lips into a smile.

On the other side, Zorzal was trying his best too.

“Fight, all of you! Hurry up and fight!”

However, his efforts were aimed in a different direction from Pina. All Zorzal did was shout at his generals and tell them to “fight, fight” in the hopes of stoking their morale.

“Why aren’t you fighting!?”

“Zorzal-sama. We can’t do battle right now. We ought to let the troops rest.”

“Yes. Even if you drive frightened troops to the battlefield, they won’t be able to fight.”

Helm and Mutra tried to express the fear which the troops were currently experiencing in words. They were not in a state where they could fight.

However, this was a ridiculous request in Zorzal’s eyes. That was because he felt that he had managed to bear with it, so it only made sense that the men ought to be fighting hard.

“Do you think Pina’s troops aren’t cowering in fear too? If the conditions are the same, then the side with greater numbers has the advantage! If we attack now, we’re sure to win!”

“That is true in theory. But when the men are afraid, they might rout because of small things.”

There were countless examples of frightened soldiers breaking and running throughout history. Frightened troops might take flight when they heard the wings of waterfowl or be unable to fight upon seeing an eclipse. In these

circumstances, the logic of the more numerous side having the advantage would be very dangerous. Thus, it would be better to let the men rest and calm down before fighting again — one could say that was a very sensible decision to make.

However, Zorzal could not understand that point.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Do you plan to let this golden opportunity slip past you? If this goes on, the main body of the regular government’s army might return!”

They were so close to a complete victory, but waiting here might result in that victory being denied; that frustration was what drove Zorzal. No, perhaps he had completely ignored the earthquake because the victory he so craved stood in front of him that. His troops might end up being completely immobilized by their fear of the earthquake if they stood still for a moment — that uneasiness was what impelled him towards a final showdown.

“But—”

“Silence! We will settle this once and for all, no matter what! Form the men up into units right now! Raise the banners high and order a full advance!”

As they looked at Zorzal, who seemed to be deaf to their pleas, Helm looked to the others and shook his head. We won’t make it— those unutterable words circulated between them.

General Karasta stepped forward.

“Your Highness, we should at least try to persuade Pina to surrender.”

“Say what?”

“Perhaps your Highness’ valor is such that you have not yet noticed, but if the men are already this afraid, then what of the women? Surely they must be so terrified of the earthquake that they cannot even stand. Perhaps if you urge a surrender now, the foe might obediently comply to avoid having to fight.”

Those words seemed to have struck a chord within Zorzal’s heart.

That was because Zorzal knew that things would go more easily that way.

“...Uh, hm. Although, will Pina surrender?”

Helm stepped up to lend his support to Karasta's idea.

"It is very likely that she will surrender."

Mutra added his own support as well.

"It, it is as he says. If Pina-denka will not listen to reason, then all we will need to do is attack again. Until then, we should let our troops calm down."

Zorzal nodded, a look of understanding on his face.

"I see. In that case, Helm; you will go to Pina and persuade her to surrender. During this time, Mutra, go sort out our formation and make our troops capable of fighting. Understood?"

As Zorzal instructed, Helm went to Pina's camp in person to parley with her.

He urged his horse forward, and finally saw Pina's troops.

In his heart, he believed that her men ought to be cowering in fear, but the unexpected fact was that all of Pina's men were possessed of steely resolve and filled with fighting spirit. The fact that her men were in such high spirits despite their massive disadvantage made Helm feel that Pina was a superior general to himself.

"Marvellously done."

They could win with their numerical advantage. But there would be many casualties if they brought frightened troops onto the battlefield, and the tables might even turn on them — such was the morale of the regular government's troops.

In order to completely triumph over such a foe, his men would need to have no fear of death. But how could he do it? Helm could not think of anything for the moment.

"As I thought, I need to get Pina-denka to surrender."

Once he approached close enough to see the base of Pina's banner, Helm called out to Pina.

"Pina-denka, this has been a long, arduous battle. Surely you've had enough?"

I doubt anyone will dare call you a coward now that you've fought this hard. They will sing of your Highness' courage throughout the ages. Now is the time to sheathe your sword. I urge you to surrender."

Her ranks were silent, and Pina replied:

"No. I will not suffer your existence any longer."

"Why are you so stubborn? Do you not care for the lives of your people? They are all capable and fair; surely they have a bright future ahead of them. Do you not wish to help them?"

"Of course I do."

"In that case—"

"It is because I want to help them that I cannot back down here."

"Why is that? You must know that ahead of you waits certain death."

"That is because if I let nii-sama escape, he will surely rally more troops for an uprising. When that happens, men will die. If we do not settle things right here and now, the number of dead and injured will only continue to pile p."

"What are you saying? Can you not see the circumstances? Should you not be considering how to save your men? Why are you considering Zorzal-denka's escape? In the future, everyone will look up to Zorzal-denka, and he will forge a new Empire, When that happens, who will rise up? Your worries are truly ill-founded. If you are willing to surrender, then the rebellion within the Empire will be at an end."

"And then you will continue fighting Nihon? And then even more soldiers will be made to die?"

"About that..."

Helm could not deny that point. If Zorzal won, he would surely go on to fight Japan.

Having commanded armies against the Japanese, Helm knew very well what Pina meant when she said, "more soldiers will be made to die."

"And then countless innocents will be drawn into the fray. All for the sake of a

battle you cannot win.”

“Your Highness. No, it is for the sake of winning the battle. This sacrifice must be made for the Empire to triumph.”

“Yes. For victory. I am standing here for the sake of victory. I am driving everyone to the abyss of death and forcing them to fight for the sake of victory.”

“You believe you will win, your Highness?”

“Of course.”

His attempt to persuade Pina had failed. Completely baffled by how these royals did things, Helm returned to Zorzal’s lines with his head in his hands.

“Helm. What did Pina say?”

“Pina-denka seems to be in the grip of a delusion. She seems to believe that she can win if she continues fighting.”

“What did you say!? Has Pina forgotten even the basics of soldiering!?”

“I doubt Pina-denka is that sort of person.”

“She must have been frightened by the earthquake, which shook her and prevented her from thinking clearly. Helm... send Pina on to the afterlife.”

“But, our forces...”

“Are fine. The men are also prepared.”

“Really?”

“Come with me.”

He followed Zorzal out of the tent, where the troops were already in their ranks. Everyone’s faces was stiff, like emotionless puppets. He looked around and saw the corpses of several soldiers on the ground.

“May, may I know what you did, your Highness?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I simply ordered Upson to strictly discipline the men and execute any soldier without the strength to fight.”

Kobold-helmeted men ran here and there.

“You! Your eyes aren’t shining enough!”

“You! Your back isn’t straight!”

All these flaws might be inconsequential to the people in question, but the oprichniki seized on them to stab the offending soldiers to death. They also shouted, “this is the fate of cowards, slackers and defeatists!” to intimidate the men.

“What do you think? The men are now ready to fight. Alright, Helm. Hurry up and teach Pina what reality is.”

Helm was stunned.

However, if this went on, those kobold-headed idiots would keep on killing the soldiers. That could only result in a defeat for the men.

Abandoning all delusions of control, Helm saluted, then mounted up and drew his sword.

“All forces! Advance!”

As the bugle was played, Zorzal’s troops maintained their neat formation as they marched forward, like a gymnastics team.

Pina gulped as she saw the enemy forces advance.

“So they’re coming, huh.”

“Indeed, your Highness.”

“Don’t worry. I’m with you.”

The staff girls gathered around Pina and drew their daggers. This was not so much to fight the enemy, but to kill themselves before they could be taken prisoner and violated, but Pina had chosen to have these girls fight the enemy instead.

“Emroy will gather the souls of all who die in battle. You must not kill yourselves.”

The girls had tied their daggers to their right hands so they would not slip free.

The knights and the soldiers from the various tribes flocked to her side, awaiting the arrival of Zorzal's forces.

"It has been an honor to fight with all of you. My thanks."

And then, Gray laughed.

"I didn't expect you to talk like it was already over. What a surprise, your Highness. After this, we shall show you our true strength. To me, those words are not enough. We're going to fight so hard you won't be able to finish thanking us all in one night!"

"Hm. When the time comes, show me everything you have."

During this time, Zorzal's forces had approached until the faces of his men were visible.

Pina raised her sword to order an advance.

"All forces!"

But the other half of her command did not reach anyone's ears.

There was a sudden roar as two F-4 Phantom fighters slashed through the sky from above Pina's head.

The napalm bombs they dropped devastated Zorzal's forces from the frontline onwards.

In their close formation, Zorzal's troops had no chance to avoid the fires of heaven raining down on them. Until the moment they noticed the hungry flames filling the sky, they had not yet noticed what had happened, and so they died.

"Sorry for the long wait, my future lovers!"

Kamikoda whooped "Yahoooo~" as he pulled his F-4 Phantom into a steep climb.

The shockwave that the fighter-bomber left in its wake seemed like it would

soar into the sky, and it pounded the eardrums of the ground-bound troops.

“Ho-jo to-ho! Ho-jo to-ho! Ho-jo to-ho! “

“Ho-jo to-ho! Ho-jo to-ho! Ho-jo to-ho! “

“Ho-jo to-ho! Ho-jo to-ho! Ho-jo to-ho! “

And then, the sneers of the Valkyries came from far into the east, accompanied by the beating of helicopter rotors. Things had happened so quickly that everyone was frozen in place, but Pina retained her senses.

“Right now! All forces charge! Donotlet onii-sama escape!”

Pina’s order resounded through her forces. Under her command, her troops charged at Zorzal’s dumbfounded army in unison.

“Ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!”

“Ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!ha!”

The squadron of UH-1J helicopters directed their machineguns at Zorzal’s army and raked them with gunfire.

The JSDF troopers within the aircraft used their own weapons to open fire as well.

Although Zorzal’s troops had clearly had it, Duran and his men alighted from the landed choppers and spread out to wipe out the stragglers from Zorzal’s army.

A soldier grabbed a riderless horse and said, “Your Majesty, I found a horse, please mount up,” and handed the reins over. This was the perfect gift for Duran, who had a bum leg.

“Mm, there’s a good lad.”

“Think nothing of it.”

Duran mounted up and called out to his surrounding men.

“Umu. All of you, gather all the horses without riders you can find, then organize yourselves into a cavalry unit.”

The Elbe Kingdom’s knights scattered over the battlefield to round up the horses before grouping up again.

Elsewhere, Pina ordered Bozes and Beefeater to chase down the biggest concentration of Zorzal’s fleeing forces.

“Seize Onii-sama! Everyone, with me!”

After that, a UH-1J descended, advancing in line with Pina’s riders.

Behind Pina, Bozes’ golden hair was messed up by the downwash, but she nimbly controlled her horse, and as she saw the faces of Kengun and Tomita, she urged Beefeater to look to the sky.

“Kengun!”

Beefeater flailed both her arms.

Behind her, Bozes caressed her tummy and said, “Daddy came to save us.”

The Emperor lay on his bed, and Minister Marx and the head maid heard the sound of swords clashing from outside the door.

Due to the intense earthquake, the furniture and other items had fallen to the ground in a mess. However, now was not the time to worry about that. In order to ward off Death, who waited just outside the door, the knights’ heroic battle had decided the fate of these people.

Finally, with a sonorous crash, the door swung open.

The people who entered were a man and woman, both getting on in years.

The man did not close the door behind him. Though they eyed the items on the ground suspiciously, they still shrunk the gap between themselves and the Emperor one step at a time.

Aurea stepped up to intercept them. However, she approached them carelessly and the Givorgeoni woman lopped off her head while saying, “what a

pest.”

“Aurea!”

Myui shouted. The decapitated body collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

She could see Shandy’s body slumped on the ground. The head maid called out to the head of House Formal, whose eyes were closed.

“Myui-sama. Over here.”

Myui grabbed her dolls and hid behind the head maid.

“Who goes there? This is the Emperor’s bedroom. At least state your name lest you be rebuked for your rudeness.”

And so, the man said, “My apologies,” and bent his knee, while he and the woman bowed their heads decorously.

“Please allow us to introduce ourselves. We are Haryo warriors and we have business with your Majesty.”

“I have heard of the Haryo before. What business do you have with me?”

The Emperor propped himself up into a sitting position and asked a tired-sounding question.

“Zorzal-sama has given us several orders. The first is to take your Majesty to Zorzal-sama’s side.”

“I cannot do that. Even getting out of bed is difficult for me.”

“Then we are bound to complete our second order.”

“And what would that be?”

“That would be to take your Majesty’s life.”

And so, Count Marx stepped between the Emperor and the Haryo man, his dagger ready.

“Impudence! Depart at once.”

“We cannot. We Haryo have made many sacrifices to come here. If we do not complete our mission, we will be disgracing our fallen comrades.”

“Hmph. As I recall, the Haryo are a race with the blood of many tribes. But they are nothing more than a ragtag bunch of misfits.”

“My, but you are well-informed.”

Saying so, the Haryo warrior tossed his glove at Count Marx.

Marx tilted his head and evaded it.

“What’s the meaning of this? Are you requesting a duel at this stage?”

“Of course not. How could we request a duel after barging our way into his Majesty’s bedchamber by force? We are the Haryo. Ultimately, we use underhanded, yet effective tactics. Fortunately, none of you here are skilled in battle. That will surely allow us to complete our task with a minimum of effort.”

At this point, Marx’s forehead began to glisten with sweat. He rubbed his eyes several times, as though he was dizzy. The way he wobbled suggested that he was having trouble standing up.

“It would seem the drug is about to take effect.

“A... drug?”

The Haryo lightly waved his other glove. A white powder lingered in the air.

“This is not dust. It is a special drug. Inhaling large quantities of it will retard the activities of the brain. When the composition is altered, it makes people more suggestible. A high dose will result in hallucinations and paralysis.”

The man’s explanation indicated that this drug was made from wheat mold.

(TL Note: Most likely ergot or the local equivalent)

By this time, Count Marx had collapsed to one knee.

“Alright... that leaves an old man, a maid, a foreign emissary, and a young girl. I hope you will not make me go to unnecessary effort. If you do not resist, we will not kill the girl as well.”

After warning the head maid, he raised his chin and ordered the woman:

“Nora, go.”

However, before Nora could take a step, she collapsed after the sound of a gunshot rang out.

“What...”

Sugawara, standing by the wall, was holding a pistol.

Perhaps the man was shocked by the sudden development, but his attention was focused on the gun that now pointed at him. In this moment, a scarlet lump fell from the ceiling, covering the man's head.

“What!?”

It was a Medusa's head. The man frantically worked his arms to peel off the thing clinging to his head, but Aurea's hair-tentacles had already wrapped around his limbs.

“What's this!?”

The man's body began to swiftly shrivel up.

Using his essence as nutrients, the Medusa grew a body from her head.

As pleasure filled his body, the man had an ecstatic look on his face as he cried out.

Upon seeing him, the Emperor shook his head with a disappointed look on his face.

“I cannot abide the moans of a man in ecstasy. How disgusting.”

And so, the Medusa stopped feeding.

“Please do not stop!”

Looking somewhat deflated, Aurea asked, “What should I do now?” and the head maid replied:

“Aurea, finish him off quickly.”

“Yes.”

In the end, the mummified man collapsed. In his place stood Aurea, who now had the body of a 13 to 14 year old.

“...I grew up.”

Myui mumbled, “that's not fair” as she looked at Aurea. She had been almost the same as herself just now, but after seeing her suddenly grow up, Myui could

not help but be envious.

“Aurea, put something on.”

After noticing where the Emperor was looking, the head maid advised her to get dressed.

Aurea did not have a nudity taboo in the usual sense, partially due to racial reasons. There had been cases where she had gone around completely naked if people around her did not tell her not to. She dressed in her maid's outfit because people had told her that she had to.

“There's nothing to wear.”

Her previous clothes no longer fit her present size. Looking around, she could not see any clothes to wear. Aurea had a resigned look on her face as she reached toward Nora's corpse to relieve it of its clothing.

However, the Emperor stopped her.

“I do not mind you remaining in that state. The skin of a beautiful maiden does my eyes a power of good, That said, it is something of a shame to have you show your lovely body to others. Therefore, I permit you to use my dressing gown. Consider it an award for your good work.”

The Emperor personally handed his satin gown to Aurea.

In the manor house, whose ceiling and walls had collapsed due to the earthquake, the Haryo warrior Uxi swung his bastard sword like a madman.

However, the battle maid Persia's defense was rock solid, and he could not bring her down.

After going several rounds with her, he finally managed to trip Persia, but he failed to mount her and chop her head off.

She evaded his stabs, and she deflected his swings with her tanto.

That was not all; when they connected edge on edge, sparks flew, but it was Uxi's bastard sword that was damaged.

“Dammit! That's one hell of a blade!”

Even though Persia's face, shoulders and head were covered in grazes, she had avoided his blade by the narrowest of margins, or blocked them with the tanto.

"Yeeart!"

In that case, he would make this a contest of strength.

Annoyed by the fact that she had deflected all the attacks he had made so far, Uxi gripped his sword in both hands and added his body weight on top of it.

He wanted to crush his way through Persia's guard from head-on and finish her off with his blade.

Persia seemed to sense Uxi's intentions, because she grunted through her gritted teeth and held out against the weight of the man attacking her.

Metal ground against metal, emitting a sound that hurt the teeth to hear.

"Just give up!"

"Like hell I will ~nya!"

Persia frantically pushed back with her arms, but she could no longer support Uxi's bodyweight. The bastard sword slowly neared Persia's throat.

"Die and be done with it! Put an end to it! Die so we can finish this!"

"No way ~nya! Ggggghhhhhhhhhh!"

Persia struggled against him as her sweat and tears flowed freely. The her from not long ago might have given up. But as she was now, Persia had a reason she could not die.

However, Uxi's blade finally touched Persia's throat.

"Damn youuuuuu!"

Persia gathered her strength and tried to force him back. But Uxi bounced with the blow and pushed back down on her.

"Aieeee!"

"I"

Uxi's blade finally cut into Persia's neck. The warm, wet sensation of her skin

being sliced through filled Persia with despair, and Uxi with a sensation of impending victory.

“Alright, now die!”

He wanted to force the blade further into Persia’s throat.

“Noooooooo!”

Persia wailed.

In that moment, there was a very satisfying gunshot, and Uxi’s head exploded like a smashed melon.

His brains oozed from a skull that was cracked open like an eggshell. Uxi’s empty cranium gushed a reddish-white paste all over Persia and he collapsed.

Shocked and frightened by the pinkish substance that covered her face, Persia wiped her face with trembling hands.

“Persia! Are you alright!?”

Kurata ran over. He was trailed by several other JSDF servicemen.

Kurata pushed aside the corpse lying on top of Persia and scooped her up into a hug.

“It’s me! Remember me? Are you alright!?”

“I, I’m alive *nya... I’m fine* nya!”

“That’s wonderful!”

After ensuring that Persia was safe, Kurata hugged Persia tightly.

The iron dragonflies dancing overhead disgorged enemies one after the other.

He had to take control of the entire army and withdraw in good order. After returning to his lines, Helm castigated his panicking men and ordered them to immediately take charge of the shaken men and calm them down.

“We’re going to retreat. We’ll fall back to Padbarcalei and regroup there.”

However, Karasta shook his head, a defeated expression on his face.

“Helm! Forget it. We’ve lost.”

“Not yet. As long as our army is fine, we can rise from the ashes! If I accept a defeat like this, how can I face Pina-denka?”

“Pina-denka? Not Zorzal-denka?”

“Oh, yes, Zorzal-denka. Is his Highness alright? Has he retreated safely?”

However, nobody could answer that question. The staff officers and his runners had vanished from the command post, and even the standard-bearers had thrown down their banners and ran away.

“Is, is anyone there? Where’s his Highness!?”

Nobody answered. At some point, the men around Helm had also vanished.

“Your Highness! Zorzal-denka!”

He frantically opened Zorzal’s tent, but there was no sign of the Crown Prince. The chair and military orders there had been cast to the ground. This tragic state of affairs could hardly be considered the orderly retreat that Helm was hoping for. It did not even have the organization one would expect from a military organization.

“W-why, why, your Highness! We need to withdraw in good order in order to rebuild our forces! What do you plan to do without an army!?”

The flames of the napalm bombs were gone by now, and the sound of boots marching in order came from the other side of the billowing smoke. Encouraged by the sound, a look of joy came over Helm’s face.

“Are there friendlies who remained in drill? Good, we’ll retreat right away! Who’s your commander?”

However, the people who emerged from the other side of the smoke were the demihuman soldiers. Beside the Hobbits marched Dark Elves, Six Arms, Dragonmen, Dwarves... it was a unit of many races.

Behind those soldiers was a red rose flag, the color of fresh blood.

He turned back, and saw King Duran of the Elbe Kingdom leading a unit over to him.

Helm shouted at the demihuman soldiers.

“What’s this!? You dare challenge me, a general of the Empire!?”

Helm drew his sword to scare away the soldiers approaching him. But he was completely surrounded, and the noose around him grew tighter and tighter.

“Dammit, in that case, Pina-denka! Fight me! Please fight me!”

Helm swung his sword at the demihumans as he shouted.

He slashed with his blade, he kicked their shields, he rammed them with his body. But he was just one man against many, and soon Helm was relieved of his sword and all his limbs pinned down.

“Pina! I, I challenge—”

A Dwarf warrior smashed Helm in the face with his shield, and his vision went black.

And so, the Elbe Kingdom’s troops faced down Pina’s men. The tense atmosphere in the air did not seem like something that should exist between friends.

“Pina-denka. I’m glad we made it in time.”

Duran greeted her, and Pina replied.

“Umu. We were saved thanks to your Majesty, King Duran.”

The tension in the air immediately evaporated, and the soldiers clasped their arms and patted each other on the back in celebration.

A unit of Zorzal’s army moved swiftly through the forest as they distanced themselves from the battlefield.

It was a small company of several dozen riders and another ten or so footsoldiers. Then there was the wagon, driven by Bouro.

“...Dammit! Why, why did things end up like this!?”

At the heart of his unit, Zorzal scratched at his head.

He ground his teeth on the back of his horse, cursing, “It’s all Helm’s fault”

and “if only Pina weren’t there” and so on. Then he went on to “It’s because of those damn traitors. They bowed to the enemy and refused to fight fair”, and then he went back to “Hm, so it ended up like this. How did things end up like this?” He was going around in circles.

The soldiers all eyed Zorzal. They did not intend to rebuke him. They simply watched Zorzal, wondering what he would do next and where he would take them.

Yet, their neutral looks were like a mirror held up to the heart of the man who was receiving them.

Zorzal’s wounded pride made him feel inferior and dejected as the soldiers looked at him. He decided to press the matter.

“What are you looking at!? Do you take me for a fool!?”

“No, we aren’t looking down on you.”

“You’re lying. You’re despising me in your hearts, aren’t you!?”

Zorzal threatened the soldiers around himself.

“Your Highness. We have nothing but the sincerest respect for you, your Highness!”

Upson, wearing his kobold-head helmet, approached Zorzal’s horse and tried to calm the man down.

Since Tyuule was not around, Upson felt a certain obligation — he felt that only he and his people could cheer Zorzal up.

However, Zorzal did not want words, but warmth. He wanted someone to forgive him, who would cunningly shunt the blame to someone else, who would encourage him and approve wholeheartedly of him. However, nobody could do that for him. Thus, Zorzal was incensed at his own sadness, and he revealed the ugly side of his anger to everyone around him.

The soldiers turned their backs on Zorzal, deliberately averting their gazes from him.

While this course of action was what Zorzal had sought, at the same time it was also a denial of Zorzal’s existence.

There was an indescribable sense of ennui among the soldiers. It was not hatred or resentment, but if one were to put it in words, it would probably sound like, “give me a break”.

Instead, everyone turned their eyes to the Primus Pilus Borhaus. He's no good— after seeing Zorzal's true nature, Borhaus was the only one the men could rely on.

Borhaus ordered the men, “Everyone, let's go.”

And so, this mass of broken men walked down the road which led them from the battlefield.

“Your Highness. What are you doing in a place like this? Did something happen?”

As he heard the sudden voice, a stunned Zorzal ordered a halt. The woman standing by the road surprised him, and he shouted: “What, is that you, Tyuule!? Where did you go? I've been looking for you all this while!”

Tyuule had run away, so why was she here? Why had she shown herself at this time? Both Bouro and Upson were suspicious, and Borhaus stood in front of Tyuule and addressed her in a voice that nobody else could hear.

“Why did you come back? Didn't you flee with the chef?”

“Why do I need to flee with someone like a chef?”

“What did you say? What scheme do you have in mind!?”

However, Tyuule did not answer Borhaus' question. That was because Zorzal had already dismounted and run towards Tyuule, knocking Borhaus aside.

“Ahhh, Tyuule, are you alright?”

Zorzal seemed to have completely forgotten what he had done to Tyuule before as he embraced her.

“Where did you go? I was so worried when I couldn't find you.”

“I've been looking for you all this while too, your Highness.”

Tyuule's hands gently enfolded Zorzal's face, and he looked on the familiar Warrior Bunny with a puzzled expression.

“What’s wrong? While I don’t know what’s going on, aren’t you being especially gentle? And you seem prettier than usual.”

“You’re so mean, your Highness. Does that mean I’m not usually pretty?”

“Er, sorry! You’re pretty enough most of the time, but you’re especially pretty today. They say women look prettier than usual because they’re happy or because something good happened to them. Did something good happen?”

“Well, something good did happen, but that doesn’t really have anything to do with your Highness.”

“Cheh, I’m starting to get jealous. So what’s making you glow today, hm?”

“It’s a secret~ Speaking of which, your Highness. What happened? Why do you look so ragged?”

And so, Zorzal explained, with a resentful look on his face.

“That idiot Helm lost. I ordered him to attack right away and fight, but he tried for a surrender and wasted valuable time, and so things ended up like this.”

“I’m certain your Highness was simply unfortunate.”

That offhand remark Tyuule had tossed off was nothing less than high praise for Zorzal, who was so depressed his face was buried in his own chest.

“Really? So it was just bad luck? So it wasn’t my fault. I’m not to blame.”

Tyuule answered Zorzal with a loving smile.

“Your Highness, a momentary setback is no failure at all, is it?”

“Even if I want to go back to the battlefield, I’ll need an army. But I have so few men now that it might be impossible.”

“Really? I don’t think so.”

“You do? Do you think I can rise again?”

“Oh yes. Although, you need to think about why you ended up like this. What else was wrong besides your luck going bad? That would be a problem in the people your Highness kept by your side. You need to remove the bad eggs and find new talents.”

And so, Bouro stepped up to second Tyuule's words.

"Yes, your Highness. This defeat isn't certain yet. As long as you're around, gathering an army won't be a problem.

Following which, Upson added:

"Weoprichnikihave been assigned all over the Empire, and we can ensure the compliance of the regional authorities. If you wish it, we can raise an army for you. You can rise again as many times as you like."

However, Tyuule tilted her head and said, "Oh, really? Your Highness, do you think you can win while being advised by such people?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your Highness. Don't you feel that you were defeated because of them?"

"Are you saying I was beaten because of Upson and Bouro?"

"Yes. Your Highness always wins his battles. Why should the cause for this defeat lie with you? Yes, this battle was different from your usual ones in only one aspect."

"And what is that?"

Zorzal hugged Tyuule tightly, and as he gazed at her, Tyuule's eyes seemed to be full of will as she stared at Zorzal and said: "That's because I wasn't by your Highness' side."

Zorzal nodded. "Yes, that's right. That was certainly true."

Bouro and Upson held their breath. They felt that even Zorzal would not believe something as illogical and baseless as that. Otherwise, all the effort they had put in towards victory would be meaningless.

However, Zorzal swallowed Tyuule's poisoned words like he was gulping down sweet wine to relieve his thirst.

"Yes, you're right."

"I was not by your Highness' side when you were fighting. Why was that? Who did this? Was it not Bouro and Upson here?"

That too was a lie. The main culprit was Zorzal. But of course, they could not

tell him that. Bouro struggled to find a line of reasoning he could use to plead his case.

“Don’t talk nonsense! You brought it on yourself! It’s because you sold out to the enemy and tried to leak out plans...”

“Oh yes, the traitor. Do you still intend to say you’re not to blame?”

Tyuule ignored Bouro and Upson and continued speaking.

“Your Highness, the two of them bullied me. Please help me.”

Tyuule hugged Zorzal’s head like she was cradling a baby.

Then, she gently patted his head.

She soothed him with sweet, gentle words, restoring his spirits. Zorzal closed his eyes as he soaked in this drug-like pleasure, and ignored every attempt to get him to return to reality.

“Your Highness, these people slandered me and called me a traitor. But if it was as they said, and if I had really betrayed your Highness, then wouldn’t you have won without me? But sadly, that was not the case. The blame lies with the people who called me a traitor and bullied me. Isn’t that so?”

“Hm, indeed. Tyuule, you’re right.”

Zorzal lifted his head and directed a razor-sharp gaze at Upson, as if to say, “where did you get this strength from?”

“All of you, apologize to Tyuule! And then, take responsibility for my defeat!”

But upon hearing this, Upson and Bouro reacted in a surprising way; they protested.

“Your, your Highness! You can’t believe the words of that rabbit woman!”

“Yes. You need to face reality!”

“Your Highness. Those people are actually saying things like that.”

“You pigdogs. Shut your disgusting mouths or I’ll strangle you.”

“Zor-Zor-Zor...Zal-sama...”

As their mouths gaped open and closed like goldfish, unable to say anything,

Tyuule asked Zorzal:

“Your Highness. Why do you even keep these vile pigdogs by your side?”

Zorzal replied frankly. “I’m sorry. I was too young and headstrong. When I was young, I was obsessed with the brothels. I felt it was better to bed slaves and demihuman girls than arrogant nobles... so I often lied to others while I visited his brothels. But please believe me. Ever since you came to my side, I never once went to his brothels again.”

“Really?”

“Er, well, I did visit... from time to time.”

“And did you attack my hometown because they asked you to?”

“Um, yes. They tricked me and said Warrior Bunnies were special. So, ah, how shall I say this... I attacked your tribe.”

Perhaps spiritually weak people had especially sharp senses, but Zorzal realized that Tyuule’s body and attitude had stiffened slightly. It would seem he had angered her.

“Ah, forgive me, Tyuule! That was when I was young and foolish. I was too innocent and they tricked me, they deceived me with their flowery words. And I did meet you because of that. In that case, isn’t that a good thing?”

“You mean it isn’t a bad thing?”

“Ah. It became a war because I wanted a woman like you. But hasn’t this sort of thing happened throughout history? And it’s also because you were too beautiful.”

“So you’re saying that you wanted me so much that you attacked my tribe, then?”

It would seem that was what Zorzal actually believed.

“In the first place, it was all his fault. He didn’t play on my desire for pure love, or the desire to make the bunnies slaves. There was a deeper plot. Not only could the bunnies not bear Haryo children, but their queens were the purest of their blood. The Haryo could not tolerate that. Their way of life was completely opposed to the Haryo. It would be best to remove such rebels before they

actually became a threat... is what he told me.”

“And naming me as a traitor to my tribe was because...?”

“Ah yes, Tyuule. He came up with that scheme so the bunnies wouldn’t unite around you.”

As Zorzal spilled his guts, Bouro broke out in a cold sweat as he stumbled back.

He moved back too much, and fell from the wagon-driver’s seat. He landed on his butt, waving his arms around and backing up as much as he could.

“Your Highness... what should we do with such wicked people?”

Zorzal immediately surmised the meaning behind Tyuule’s smile.

Tyuule glancing at Zorzal and Zorzal speaking her will through his mouth and treating it like his own idea was a very common thing.

“I’ve decided. We ought to rid ourselves of these villains. This is a time-honoured practice.”

As he heard this, Upson and Bouro blanched.

“Please, please wait, your Highness. How will you rise again without us!?”

However, Zorzal addressed the soldiers.

“Gentlemen, the responsibility for this defeat lies with these people. Of course, that implies it was my mistake for once taking their side. For that I must apologize. Therefore, I seek everyone’s help in rectifying this mistake!”

Centurion Borhaus silently drew his sword, and he surrounded Upson and Bouro with the rest of the men before awaiting orders.

“Tyuule. Do what you want with them.”

“In that case, please chop them to pieces.”

The soldiers immediately carried out the order.

“Your Highness! Please wait! Save me!”

Bouro reached out for mercy, but he was surrounded and stabbed repeatedly by swords. He collapsed to the ground, his arm still outstretched.

Borhaus looked at Zorzal and replied:

“Your Highness. The order has been carried out. What shall we do next?”

“Do as you wish. Thank you for your hard work...”

Thus, Borhaus immediately removed his helmet and cast it aside. His brusque attitude seemed to say, “I’ve discharged my duty, it’s no longer my problem.” Yet, nobody moved to stop him.

The soldiers following him cast aside their banners and helmets. They looked like they were done with being soldiers. They glanced one last time at Zorzal, who was clinging to Zorzal’s chest, and then left.

“...Is everyone gone?”

Zorzal, the only one remaining, pressed his ear to her chest as though he was listening for her heartbeat. It looked like he was calming himself down.

“Yes, they’re gone,” Zorzal muttered in a quiet voice. “Surely... surely your revenge... isn’t complete yet, right? There ought to be other villains to get rid of, right?”

“Oh yes. There’s one more person.”

“I, I have a request. No, I know I have no right to ask anything of you. But if that smile of yours is in the slightest way sincere, then please. Let me rest in your bosom... please.”

And so Tyuule said, “alright,” and kissed Zorzal.

Zorzal hungrily embraced Tyuule. But then he suddenly went “ooog!”, a gurgle coming from below his belly, and his mouth separated from Tyuule’s. Delilah’s knife was buried in Zorzal’s belly to the hilt.



“Guwaaargh!”

There was no telling if the blood he was currently coughing up came from inside his mouth, or internal bleeding caused by being stabbed in the gut. Zorzal clung tightly to Tyuule with a pained look on his face.

“Tyuule...”

His mouth was stained red as he embraced Tyuule’s head in his arms.

“Come, come die with me. You, you truly were the only...”

“No! I’ll never do it! I don’t want to die with you like this! I don’t want to die!”

“No... we...”

Tyuule could not possibly beat Zorzal’s strength. Knowing she could not resist him, Tyuule slowly closed her eyes to reject the reality before her. And then, in her heart, she imagined the future she had obtained.

In the end, there was a snapping sound from her slender neck as it broke. In that moment, the world was filled with brilliant white light, and a hand extended to Tyuule from within the light.

“I’m here for you, Tyuule-san.”

“Fu-Furuta-san?”

“Please, come help me in my shop. Let’s start with picking the color of the wallpaper. What color would be best?”

“Light pink is good.”

“Thank you very much. It was really hard to decide.”

Furuta took orders in the kitchen and made food for the customers. Tyuule’s job was to receive customers, show them to their seats, and then bid them farewell. Then she would clear the bowls and plates and prepare to welcome the next customer.

They were busy days. They were also happy days. Tyuule’s joyous days gradually blurred together into a haze of white, and finally vanished.

And then, the eternal silence came. Tyuule’s smiled blissfully. It was beautiful.

“Don’t you love me, Tyuule!? Don’t you love me!?”

Zorzal threw Tyuule’s body aside, and then collapsed on his back.

“Dammit! What, what am I dying for...”

“General Hazama! A report from Colonel Kengun:we have exterminated Zorzal’s army, over.”

After hearing the report from his staff officer, Hazama and the servicemen around him cheered loudly.

“Excellent news.”

“Now, everything is finally over.”

“Umu. Indeed, it’s over. But frankly speaking, there’s a long way to go.”

Hazama looked back.

He saw the dome, so badly damaged that it had collapsed, as well as the wounded being carried away. At the foot of the hill, Arnus Town was completely destroyed.

The residents of Arnus stood dumbly before the rubble-strewn ruins of their town.

The fact that nobody had been hurt by the collapsing buildings was the only silver lining in a very dark cloud. Thanks to the monsters' rampage, everyone had taken shelter in the garrison. But as they looked upon their wrecked town, they were at a loss for what to do next. Where would they sleep tonight? What about their food? Their jobs? They had lost them all in an instant.

"...It's all gone."

"What should we do next?"

"Right, right now, we ought to take stock of the damage. We need information. In any case, we'll need to check the collapsed buildings, inspect the scene of the damage, budget for rebuilding... we need to meet to discuss things, but what can we discuss..."

As Diabo counted off the tasks which needed to be done on his fingers, he gave everyone instructions.

But by the time he reached his third finger, everyone had turned their backs on Diabo. That was because they did not need his words.

What they really wanted was hope. It was true that Diabo was being very realistic and systematic about the whole situation. However, that list of critical tasks made them seem so much more difficult when they listened to him count them off. As they looked at the great task before them, the wounded people could only sit and watch in silence.

How are we going to overcome this?

It was impossible. Nobody could do it. Those feelings left everyone dumbfounded.

"Oh, so you're all here? Are you alright? Is anyone hurt?"

Itami and Tomita showed up, waving to everybody.

Everyone silently turned their eyes to Itami.

“What, what’s that for? What happened?”

“There’s no future ahead for all of them.”

Rory had a wicked smile on her face.

Tuka clung to Itami’s arm, as if on purpose, and asked:

“Hey, Father, what should we do? Everyone’s in trouble, how can we help them?”

Lelei rose shakily to her feet, and hugged Itami wordlessly and tightly.

“Huh, are you alright?”

“Not alright. I’m tired.:

Itami gently patted Lelei’s head. Then he considered that she was only 16, and then looked around to everyone.

“It’ll be fine, it’ll be fine. We’ll get through this somehow. You’ll get your previous lives back in no time. Ah, but it’ll be hard if you don’t pitch in and help, though. After all, I can’t do anything by myself. So please, help me out!”

Those words finally eased the worried looks on everyone’s faces.

“In any case, let’s start by clearing the debris and building places to live, even if they’re just little shacks. And we’ll dig out the food and other stuff that got buried.”

And so, the townsfolk began to work, as though they had suddenly remembered what they ought to be doing.

Itami sighed in relief as he watched them go, and then he looked back to Rory, Tuka and Lelei.

“Speaking of which, I noticed something... when it’s time to open the Gate again, you need to make a mark on the other world to find it among all the countless others, right? When did you finish that?”

“Eh?”

Rory and Tuka tilted their heads. They did not remember making such preparations.

Naturally, everyone's eyes went to Lelei. But Lelei buried her face in Itami's chest, and she showed no sign of wanting to raise her head. Or rather, she had her face in Itami's chest and was using strength to plaster herself there so she would not have to look up.

"Hey, Lelei. What's wrong?"

Lelei did not answer. But the very large sweatdrop on the back of her head showed her inner panic.

Four Years Later

“Good evening, this is the 09PM news. During his trip to America, Prime Minister Nagakura began talks early this morning with the President at the White House. The talks concerned the Okinawa base. Prime Minister Nagakura cited the need for cooperation between the two nations and to reduce the strain on the residents of Okinawa in order to maintain the stability of East Asia as he asked to shift the location of the base there. Here we have the relevant data...”

Kuribayashi Nanami was a newscaster for the newly-established online news channel, and in the split second after she finished delivering the financial news and before they went to commercials, her tense expression softened a little.

Whether there was a problem with the recording, or if Sunagawa the cameraman had deliberately captured that moment, that instant of relaxation ended up being aired. However, her natural expression was more charming by far — at least, that was what the audience comments flowing below her image said.

However, Nanami paid it no heed whatsoever and immediately bit her seductive lip, sitting ramrod straight as she looked straight into the camera and coolly delivered the next piece of news.

She reported all the information she received without editing it in any way. It was the audience who would decide whether it was good or bad. This was why she reported the news — it permeated Nanami’s style of journalism, and the audience trusted her highly.

Perhaps she could do this because she was broadcasting online. Nanami had released all the news she had collected in an anonymous format. Anyone could question, discuss and refute it. When the information was biased, she would swiftly correct it — Nanami was very quick to respond to the contents of her reports.

“And today’s hot topic is a discussion of the aftermath of the Ginza Incident, which has been heavily discussed on message boards. It has been four years

since the Ginza Incident, and regarding expectations for the reopening of the Gate, there have been no signs that it has been opened thus far. A section of public opinion has expressed grave misgivings over the possibility of the reopening of the Gate.”

As Nanami read that part of her script, the news ticker underneath her displayed the address of the website and said, “Tokyo University Professors postulate that linking two worlds requires a crystal on both sides to serve as a marker. However, the closing of the Gate was apparently very rushed and there was no time to install it” as it scrolled across the screen.

“Indeed. Therefore, tonight we will be presenting testimonies from witnesses at the Ginza Incident and the Ginza Disturbance to verify the possibilities for the future. For that reason, we have Professor Emeritus Urushibata from Tokyo University to join us, as well as Professors Youmei and Hakui.”

In front of Nanami were the three men who had been invited as guest speakers for tonight’s show.

Teasing comments like, “Long time no see prof” and “Time for another brawl” scrolled across the screen.

“We also have Mochizuki Noriko-san, and our special guest Countess Sherry from the Imperial Embassy in Japan.”

This was followed by Sherry — who had become even more beautiful after growing up — hurriedly bowing her head.

The screen immediately filled with a blizzard of comments from what seemed to be Sherry fans, completely obscuring the screen. It was soon followed by comments like, “Your love for her is blocking her out.”

As Tozu watched the OLED screen, he said:

“Kuribayashi’s sister is as fierce as always.”

The small establishment was packed full of people.

Although there were several empty seats at the tables, they had “Reserved” signs on them tonight, so the place was already full.

“Katsumoto! I heard your confession crashed and burned!”

As Kuwabara mentioned something that ought to have been hidden, Katsumoto had nothing to say in his defense, only “Where did you hear that from?”

Furuta, who was serving food in small bowls, answered on his behalf.

“I heard it was from Lieutenant Yanagida.”

Katsumoto stared daggers at Yanagida, then shrugged. His eyes seemed to be saying, “Hey, I told you to keep it a secret.”

“Well, it’s a shame he failed, but I heard he worked really hard.”

Delilah was dressed in a beautiful kimono, as she spoke up to try and ease the tension.

The technique with which she put a steaming bowl of tea down in front of Katsumoto was very well-honed. Having worked at Arnus, it was second nature for Delilah. She blended in quickly after working at Furuta’s place.

“Well, maybe it was courageous for Katsumoto, but I doubt that helps with bringing in the star newscasters and assistant professors now, does it?”

“Speaking of which, what’s with you, Tozu? You’re living with your lover, so shouldn’t you be getting married about now?”

The Kuwabara who was saying that had retired from the JSDF and now worked for a security firm while taking care of his grandkids every day. Yanagida handed Kuwabara a cup and said, “Here, have one.”

“Good evening.”

Everyone’s eyes went to the door that had suddenly opened. Nishina stood there in his uniform.

“Oh, Nishina, you’re here, and just in time.”

As Kuwabara said so, he hoisted a mug of beer.

“A souvenir from Hokkaido.”

As he said that, Nishina handed a Furuta a styrofoam box that had to be held in both hands. He probably meant that it should be shared with everyone, being food. The smell of the beach wafted out from it; perhaps it had been taken from

the sea. Nishina took off his coat and handed it to Delilah, who hung it up on a hanger before carefully smoothing out the creases and then hung it on a wall. Everyone's uniforms were on the wall.

"Welcome. Nishina-san, where are you stationed now?"

"Kutchan, in Hokkaido."

"Hokkaido's a cold place, right?"

"Yes, a very cold place. Furuta... it seems Delilah's fitting in."

"Well, it has been three years, after all."

Saying so, Furuta laughed.

"Hey, Nishina, is it true Sergeant Azuma went to officer school?"

"Yeah, he's currently in Kurumi. Everyone's schedules clash, so maybe we won't be able to gather everyone at once."

"Sasagawa retired and moved to Kanazawa, right?"

"His dad's a craftsman, he said he wanted to help his dad out."

"And Kurokawa's working in the JSDF Central Hospital. They say she's the head nurse now."

"I wonder how the el-tee and the others are doing?" Kuwabara said as he poured the beer.

In order to lighten the mood, Furuta said, "this is what Sergeant Major Nishina brought, and then he placed a big gunkan tray of sashimi in front of everybody. This lavish spread was met by cheers of "ohhhh" from everyone.

"Your security's pretty heavy, is there a hitman after you?"

The first thing Kanou — who had retired from politics — did when he got onto Natsume's car was not to greet him, but poke fun at the amount of guards he had around him. Natsume had become the leader of the conservative party.

"This is quite normal already. After all, Prime Minister Nagakura's approval rates are dropping fast. The dissolution of parliament is coming soon, and

security's starting to go mental. That's why it feels so tight."

"So, what is it today?"

"I want to to fulfil our part of the agreement."

"That could refer to a lot of things Where will you be going?"

"First, to Ginza."

In the moment that the Gate joining the Special Region to Ginza had disappeared, it had also triggered an intensity 5 earthquake on Japan's side.

An intensity 5 earthquake did not affect Japan much. However, it had a grave impact outside Japan.

After all, there were places in the world where earthquakes had never happened before, and while it varied from country to country, there were even some nations which did not even understand the concept of shockproofing. They lived in buildings built of rocks or dried peat blocks, or used bamboo poles to substitute for steel rebar in concrete structures. Those suffered tremendously under an intensity 5 earthquake.

The international community realized something.

The Gate was very dangerous.

Even opening the Gate just once had caused this much energy... distortion to accumulate. In that case, what would happen if it were not closed properly?

"At the time, the whole world was suspicious of Japan for hardly being damaged at all.

"So that's why things are like this... I heard our ambassador to the United Nations is having a hard time. Apparently, China and Russia are all saying that the Gate is to be jointly managed if it's opened again."

They could see the familiar dome in the middle of the Ginza streets.

"We doubled the thickness of the concrete dome to protect against dangerous bugs."

"Huh, that's pretty impressive."

Their car entered the Ginza Garrison, and then the interior of the dome.

The iron doors closed, and the internal lights came on.

There were diamond fragments in the middle of the dome; half of a large diamond which had been broken up. Kanou brought his face near the white objects in the glass case.”

“Itami gave it to his mother’s legal representative.”

“Oh yes. For a moment I was wondering what it was. This is a pure crystal formed of a single element... it ought to be able to serve as a marker. However, the treasurers only think of profit and the rent is expensive.”

“Really now. In that case, all we need to do is wait for them to return.”

“Mm, all we have to do is wait. Then let’s go to the next place.”

Natsume and Kanou took the car to Akihabara next.

“Don’t tell me... it’s in this place?”

“Yes. After all, tomorrow’s the opening day, so if we want to scout it out, we need to come today, otherwise we won’t be able to look in peace.”

Kanou and Natsume entered the back door of this new building in Akihabara. The overnight campers were waiting out in the front for tomorrow’s opening.

“Overnight queuing’s supposed to be banned... well, that’s those guys for you.”

“The media poked fun at the idea of a national manga cafe, but we finished it in the end.”

It was a library of every single doujin that had ever been released. It was treated as an annex of a national library, but it was also a manga and anime culture museum which contained all sorts of anime recordings, anime cels, scripts and many other such articles.

Also, the three days from tomorrow onward would be the anniversary of its foundation, and there would be a comics market held inside the building. The people lining up outside were queuing for that.

“Thank yous. At least he won’t call me a liar when he comes back.”

Kanou smiled to himself as he saw the tightly-packed stalls in the sprawling event hall.

The circles and participants had already moved their wares in and were busy decorating and setting up their stalls in preparation for tomorrow's opening. After their work was done, they greeted their peers from other circles, read the news, and the overall atmosphere was quite lively.

"Oho... they all seem quite busy."

"This is my first time seeing this, but they all seem quite energetic."

Natsume picked up a book in front of him, and opened it.

"Ah, this is..."

Kanou tried to stop him after he noticed, but he was a fraction too late. Natsume froze in place. He had opened a book of steamy man-love drawn for a female audience.

"It's quite something, right?"

"Well, how shall I put this... I don't really think I want to understand it."

"Eh, I guess."

"Now, Itami would probably like the stuff over on that wall."

The nearby circle member did not miss Kanou and Natsume's exchange.

"Ah, are you friends of Itami?"

"Mm, yes. Speaking of which, are you a friend of Itami too?"

"Oh, yes. Wait, are you Taro-kakka? And would that make you Natsume-kakka!?"

"You know us?"

"I've heard of you. Although, that would make things difficult..."

"Why do you say that?"

"You've come all this way, but we can't give things out today. I wanted to give you something, though. What should we do?"

"Thank you, but it's fine. I'll come again tomorrow."

“Tomorrow, huh. That’ll be hard on both your Excellencies. After all, the competition will be fierce. Still, I’ll hand it to Itami first.”

“Did you say hand it to Itami!?”

Kanou had no idea how the conversation had developed, and he began to wonder if the Itami being mentioned was the same Itami he knew.

“You mean Itami’s ex-wife, Risa, right?”

“Oh, right. Itami Youji... well, I haven’t seen him in a long time, but I don’t think I’d mistake him for someone else. That said, apparently Risa-san was really mad. When I told her, “we saw Itami,” she shouted about, ‘why didn’t you contact me after coming back!? Where are you, get out here right now!’ and then she ran off.”

“What!? That is to say, Itami Youji is right here?”

He was talking like Itami Youji was present in this very place.

“Of course. It’s not like there are other Youjis around... ah, he’s over there. Look — hey, Youji~!”

The vendor waved ahead of him.

Of course, even his shout failed to reach its target amidst the hubbub. But thanks to the vendor’s cry, Kanou managed to spot Itami.

Yes, Itami was right there.

And he had with him a black goth lolita, an Elf, a Dark Elf, a silver-haired girl holding a staff and a red-headed princess.

“Ah...”

After that, Itami spotted Kanou.

“Oh, wait, you’re—!?”

What are you doing there— in response to Kanou’s question, Itami fumbled around for an excuse like a boy caught playing a prank.

“Ah, er, you see, we made a lot of mistakes while we tried to find this world, and then we realized that my memories — or rather, my obsession, or my passion — could be put to use. And then, I don’t know why, but the Gate

opened here. It must be because ah, er, I wanted to go to Akihabara and the Comiket, I guess? I'm so glad that both the conditions were met... although, this might have just been another world that was very similar to the original one, so we just came to scout it out first."

Natsume grabbed his head and groaned, "Ahhh, we spent four years of preparation and budget..."

After seeing Itami had not changed despite his long absence, Kanou relaxed.

"Is that so? So after trial and error, this place opened up... I see, so that's how it is. This is the only place and the only time when both conditions would be fulfilled. And you call this a reconnaissance. Does faffing about in this event hall count as reconnaissance..."

How much do you like this sort of thing, anyway— Kanou muttered.

And so, the story of their battles in the Special Region has come to an end.

Of course, their struggles have not yet ended. Just like in the history textbooks, peace is merely the brief period of stability until the next war.

Therefore, they are still preparing for the storms to come, even now. That said, the record of their activities in the Special Region comes to an end with this story.

"Thus, the JSDF fought here."

The End